

MINUTES OF THE NOVEMBER 17, 2025 SELECT BOARD MEETING

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

ALSO PRESENT: Town Administrator Tim Roache, Assistant Town Administrator and Parks & Recreation Director Seth Hickey, Town Clerk/Tax Collector Deborah Bakie, DPW Crew Lead Trevor Batchelder, Departmental Administrative Coordinator Britt Fowle

Mr. Anderson motioned to approve the November 3, 2025 minutes and the special meeting minutes of November 10, 2025 as amended. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton recognized John Cushing, Chair of the 5th annual First Responders Golf Tournament, who presented a check for \$30,770. He said the event was well attended and noted next year's event will be on October 5th. Mr. Crow said there will be a 50/50 split of the proceeds between Fire Dept Association and Stratham Police Department. Ms. Knab motioned to accept the \$30,770 earned through the First Responders Golf Tournament to be used for the Stratham Police Department with gratitude. Mr. Houghton seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton recognized Town Clerk/Tax Collector Deborah Bakie to present her budget. Ms. Bakie noted that three elections are scheduled for 2026—the Town Election, General Election, and State Primary Election. The new voting machines will be in place. She estimated the election supplies line item, as ballots will be ordered through a new vendor.

There are no changes to compensation for the ballot clerks. The Moderator and Assistant Moderator were moved to the payroll line item by the former Finance Administrator. Ms. Bakie reported a slight increase in meals, with Auxiliary support continuing. She requested a \$300 increase for the Supervisors of the Checklist due to new mandates requiring more frequent meetings and increased checklist reviews which will now occur annually rather than every five or ten years.

In response to Ms. Knab's inquiry regarding ballot clerks, Ms. Bakie explained that additional crowd control was necessary for the presidential election but expressed confidence that current staffing levels are sufficient. She noted that her budget does not factor in the 3% salary increase placeholder. Supplies remain minimal, and she emphasized her efforts to remain budget-conscious.

Ms. Bakie highlighted the importance of attending the Annual Town Clerk Conference, which provides updates on changes to motor vehicle and election laws. Discussion also included the copier contract and the line item covering those costs.

Mr. Houghton recognized Mr. Hickey for his department report. Mr. Hickey reported continued success with senior programming and noted that the Recreation Commission has welcomed two new members, reflecting effective community outreach. Basketball programs are underway, with planning already in progress for baseball season.

TMAC has reviewed guidance regarding e-bikes and intends to seek input from the Conservation Commission and SHPA to ensure alignment. Mr. Houghton requested a copy of the memo from TMAC to those groups. Mr. Hickey anticipates TMAC will provide a recommendation to the Select Board on off-leash dogs at the park before year-end.

Mr. Hickey reported ongoing work with DPW and SHPA on a 10-year plan for the park, leading to broader strategic planning. He noted that \$50,000 was included in last year's CIP for a master plan initiative, and UNH has since provided a proposal of \$75,000 for a two-year plan, which serves as a benchmark. An RFP has not yet been developed due to insufficient funding.

Mr. Houghton asked about input sources. Mr. Hickey explained that discussions are currently limited to SHPA, but broader outreach is anticipated. The UNH proposed doing multiple surveys of park users and community members, along with research on community impact. Mr. Hickey suggested the Board could form a committee to ensure full engagement and participation.

He emphasized the need for additional funding to move forward in 2026. Mr. Houghton's preference is to act soon to avoid cost increases. Mr. Hickey agreed, highlighting the importance of proceeding while the Park Association is actively involved. He described the project as part of the park's evolution from a fairground to a community space, with decisions needed on what will remain, be repurposed, or omitted. A third-party opinion will be essential.

Mr. Anderson agreed, noting the value of an independent perspective without emotional attachment. Ms. Knab asked about capital improvement funding and SHPA's role, observing their push for fast action. Mr. Hickey explained that SHPA has proposed some short-term repairs, such as roof patching, but emphasized that no large-scale investments should occur until a comprehensive plan is in place.

Mr. Houghton expressed support for Mr. Hickey's approach, emphasizing the importance of funding a strategy rather than individual wishes. He noted that while short-term capital should be directed to necessary items, a clear strategy is essential before committing significant funds. Mr. Anderson agreed, adding that expenditures should align with the long-range plan.

Ms. Knab cautioned against spending large sums on planning without meaningful impact, observing that planning efforts sometimes fail to translate into action. Mr. Houghton stressed the need to build consensus among park users. Mr. Roache remarked that planning outcomes often take years to materialize, citing the Seacoast Greenway as an example.

Ms. Knab reiterated the value of issuing an RFP to guide the process. Mr. Hickey concluded that they are at the starting point and can plan for next year.

Mr. Hickey reported on the Stevens Park project, noting the need for additional engineering funds to address relocation of the pavilion and a more comprehensive drainage study. Mr. Anderson moved to approve an amendment to the current professional services agreement in the amount of \$6,500. In response to Ms. Knab's inquiry regarding funding, Mr. Hickey confirmed the amount is available in the CIP. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton asked about anticipated construction costs for this phase. Mr. Hickey explained that an RFP will be required. Mr. Anderson noted that funding had been set aside for envisioned improvements including the pavilion, drainage, parking lots, and pickleball courts. Ms. Knab requested a rough estimate of costs. Mr. Hickey stated he is not seeking additional funding this year, but possibly in 2027. He reminded the Board that the individual previously leading the project is no longer involved and that significant changes were made to the plan after approval.

Ms. Knab asked if construction could begin once Emanuel Engineering completes its work. Mr. Hickey responded that it should be possible, noting the project is on track and will proceed in phases following evaluation of priorities.

Mr. Hickey provided an update on programming, noting the potential relocation of the summer camp to Stratham Hill Park next year. He met with the town fire inspector to review the 4-H barn space, who raised no objections. The Recreation Commission has been updated on the proposal. The move would be a transition from Stratham Memorial School, which will be under construction next summer, to the barn. Mr. Hickey's next steps include confirming with the school that an alternate location is needed and walking through the space with last year's summer camp director to ensure logistical feasibility. He observed that this would return the program to its original location when he first began in Stratham.

Mr. Hickey then transitioned to his 2026 budget discussion. Building on recent successes with senior programming, he proposed hiring a part-time staff member to develop a teen-focused program, representing a \$20,000 increase to the recreation payroll. He noted this initiative aligns with the department's mission over the past five to six years to serve this population. Two interns are already lined up for spring and fall 2026 to assist. With senior programming stabilized, he sees 2026 as an opportune time to expand.

Mr. Anderson asked how the program coordinator position would be funded. Mr. Hickey confirmed it would be supported through the general fund.

Mr. Hickey explained that the Town continues to fund the program coordinator position held by Zach Cherry, which is reimbursed \$20,000 annually. Senior citizen programming, coordinated by Diane Smith, is funded through the general fund. He proposed using the same model to establish a teen programming position.

In response to Mr. Houghton's question regarding offsetting revenue, Mr. Hickey confirmed that revenue continues to offset the \$20,000 recreation payroll cost and that the teen programming position is expected to become revenue-generating. He noted that Mr. Cherry's reimbursement is tied to youth sports programming, while Ms. Smith's programming generates less revenue. Adjustments made to the senior programming model this year have been successful, with seniors contributing more toward programming costs than in 2024.

Mr. Hickey requested an additional \$5,000 for senior programming to expand outreach through brochures, newsletters, and community flyers. He emphasized the effectiveness of mailers sent to all town households and proposed doubling that effort in 2026.

Mr. Anderson asked whether senior programs that reach capacity shortly after registration are self-funding and whether fees are set appropriately. Mr. Hickey explained that the department strives for balance. For example, a painting class previously offered free of charge now requires a \$50 fee for residents, with non-residents paying approximately 20% more. This helps subsidize costs but does not fully cover them. He also noted that certain programs, such as the history-themed lunch, are offered free to residents, with a nominal fee for non-residents.

Mr. Anderson asked if the Town was losing money. Ms. Knab responded that the goal is not strictly financial but to create opportunities for seniors, emphasizing the need to be mindful of residents on fixed incomes. Mr. Hickey acknowledged that introducing fees led to a temporary decline in participation, but numbers have since rebounded. He stated the previous model was

not sustainable and that the current approach provides a better balance, which will be re-evaluated in the future.

Addressing non-resident participation, Mr. Hickey confirmed that all programs include a non-resident fee to account for staff and administrative time.

Mr. Hickey also reported that Thursday Nights at the Park, held June through mid-September, have been funded through the Recreation Revolving Fund for the past four years. Musicians are paid \$200 per performance, with the program shortened by four weeks as a cost-saving measure. Weather cancellations also reduce costs. He noted the program is well attended, open to the public, and provides a valuable opportunity for residents and non-residents to gather as a community.

In his role as Assistant Town Administrator, Mr. Hickey noted his collaboration with Mr. Roache and directed the Board to the updated Safety Manual prepared by the Joint Loss Management Committee. He explained the manual should be updated annually, though the last update was in 2022, and confirmed it complies with Department of Labor standards. Adoption requires a Select Board signature, and all departments must have access for audit purposes.

Mr. Hickey reported that the Joint Loss Management Committee has met three times and is actively engaged in workers' compensation matters. Current members include Mr. Hickey (Chair), Karen Richard (Admin), Jenn Schaaff (Police Admin), Trevor Batchelder (DPW), Vanessa Price (Planning), Bettina Landgraf (clerks), and Judy Fingerlow (Library). Efforts are underway to secure representation from the Fire Department and greater participation from the Police Department. Ms. Knab suggested including Health Officer Jason Durrance. Mr. Hickey noted that Primex presented to the committee on its duties.

Mr. Houghton emphasized that the Department of Labor mandates committee composition and stressed the importance of safety, noting past quarterly reports on accidents and lost time impact workers' compensation ratings and premiums. He stated the committee's role should include corrective actions and procedural changes. Mr. Hickey confirmed this is the committee's focus.

The Board observed the manual was dated 2025 and agreed it should reflect 2026. Ms. Knab moved to adopt the Joint Loss Management Committee's Safety Manual effective January 1, 2026, with annual updates. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Hickey updated the Board on the new website, noting that training opportunities will be available soon and progress continues. In response to Mr. Anderson's question regarding responsibility for Boards and Committee pages, Mr. Hickey stated that Ms. Richard has served as the point person for some committees, though not all.

Mr. Hickey reported attending "Human Resources for the Non-Human Resource Professional" training and shared that he will attend the NHMA conference next week with several department heads.

Ms. Knab raised the Recreation Commission nomination. Mr. Hickey confirmed the nominee attended the meeting and that another applicant has recently applied. He stated both would be

strong additions. He noted that the current Chair of the Recreation Commission also chairs TMAC, and expressed hope that someone will step forward to assume the Recreation Commission Chair role. He expressed gratitude for the positive community response.

Mr. Houghton then moved to the IT budget. Mr. Hickey noted key drivers include the Town's IT provider, Block 5, recurring contracts and services, and cybersecurity awareness training. Costs also include recurring Microsoft 365 services, ranging from full suite licenses to individual email accounts, applied town-wide (police department excluded). Recurring phone services cost approximately \$1,000 per month, with annual renewals for gateways and associated licenses.

Mr. Houghton asked what is driving managed IT service costs. Mr. Hickey explained that cybersecurity training is the primary factor, noting that staff are periodically tested with simulated phishing attempts.

Mr. Houghton asked about readiness to discuss server cloud migration. Mr. Roache explained that many proprietary budgeting and finance software programs are not yet supported on cloud-based servers, so migration cannot occur all at once. Recreation will be used as a test case for cloud migration with Block 5.

Mr. Houghton asked about the benefits. Mr. Roache cited improved efficiency in information sharing and communication, as well as eliminating the need to replace servers in the future. He noted the need to understand how proprietary municipal software will transition.

Mr. Hickey added that Block 5 anticipates many municipal software systems will move to cloud-based platforms within the next four to five years, including those used by the Clerks. He emphasized potential cost savings by avoiding server maintenance, while acknowledging the need for training and understanding of cloud operations. He highlighted efficiency gains, such as working with live documents during budget preparation rather than sending files back and forth.

Mr. Houghton expressed support but clarified that fully utilizing Microsoft software is different from migrating all systems to the cloud. Mr. Hickey agreed, noting that cloud migration will be a gradual process with possible roadblocks, but if it improves communication and efficiency, it will provide value.

Mr. Houghton recognized Mr. Batchelder for the DPW report. Mr. Batchelder reported that crack sealing, paving, and line striping have been completed. Fall cleanup is underway, and the department is preparing for winter operations with three plow trucks ready and five staff signed on for plowing and salting. Catch basin cleaning for MS4 permits has been completed, with one additional day planned. He will also walk through the Lane property to familiarize himself and to prepare for grounds maintenance.

In response to Mr. Houghton's inquiry, Mr. Batchelder confirmed that the Gifford House exterior siding project, completed by Drew Bedard, is finished.

Mr. Batchelder then addressed the Transfer Station, noting new stickers have been received and will be distributed by Ms. Bakie's office. Mailers regarding price increases and program

changes are ready to be sent to residents. Mr. Houghton suggested including them with tax bills; discussion followed on feasibility. Mr. Batchelder added that notices will also be posted on the Transfer Station message board.

Mr. Batchelder reported that the loader has been ordered from the CAT dealer, with delivery expected late November or early December. The Skag mower was sent to auction. The ambulance did not meet the reserve bid, and the police cruiser received no bids. Ms. Knab asked if the ambulance bid was close to reserve; Mr. Batchelder confirmed it was not (\$5,100 versus \$10,000). Ms. Knab suggested revisiting the Ukraine donation discussion. Mr. Anderson recommended listing the vehicles on additional websites and rotating postings to broaden exposure, noting he did not want to sell the ambulance for only \$5,000. Mr. Houghton stated uncertainty about the ambulance's value and suggested contacting Northeast Auto Auction in Kittery for the police cruiser. Mr. Batchelder reported he had reached out to McFarland Ford but had not received a response. The Board agreed to continue efforts to sell both the ambulance and police cruiser.

Mr. Batchelder presented the DPW budget. In response to Mr. Houghton's question, he confirmed the payroll line item reflects a fully staffed department. He noted certain expenses, such as utilities, are not under departmental control. Mr. Anderson observed that the department is projected to come in under budget by approximately \$187,000. Mr. Batchelder confirmed this figure, which accounts for paving, line striping, field closures, and salt. Hillside reported that fields will be closed once his equipment is repaired.

Mr. Batchelder proposed using \$32,000 of the surplus to replace the oldest mower and upgrade the equipment trailer. The current trailer, purchased prior to acquiring excavators, requires replacement to meet proper load capacity; a quote of \$14,000 has been received. The oldest mower is at the end of its service life, leaving five mowers in operation (excluding the one recently sent to auction).

The Board agreed there is sufficient funding to cover these purchases. As both items are included in next year's CIP, they could be removed if purchased now. Mr. Anderson motioned to authorize the Town Administrator to move forward with the purchase of a skag zero turn mower at a cost of \$18,000 and equipment trailer at a cost of \$14,000 as outlined the November 10 memo from the DPW Department. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Batchelder presented the DPW projected 2026 budget, reflecting a 3% overall increase, primarily due to a \$15,000 rise in Casella tipping fees. Mr. Houghton asked if this was consistent with the contract. Mr. Roache explained that the contract includes a 4% annual increase for solid waste and recycling, but tipping fees are separate and determined by waste management costs. Overall, sanitation reflects a 10% increase. Mr. Houghton suggested Paul Deschaine could provide clarification. Mr. Anderson noted that excluding tipping fees, the budget is essentially flat. Ms. Fowle added that \$3.50 is included but offset by a refund, as outlined in waste management's letter. Mr. Anderson stated the Finance Administrator could confirm details.

Discussion then turned to general government buildings. Mr. Houghton raised concerns that the accounting concerning using rent to cover Lane Homestead property expenses is misleading and not transparent. Mr. Anderson observed there is revenue with offsetting expenses. Ms. Knab

questioned whether a property manager should be appointed, noting DPW will absorb plowing and mowing but expressing concern about broader property maintenance responsibilities. Mr. Houghton felt DPW's role should be limited to plowing and mowing.

Mr. Houghton moved to capital items. Mr. Batchelder reported that the only unfilled position is the General Foreman role, vacant since Al Williams retired. He proposed transitioning the position to a Facilities Maintenance Lead, who would oversee Mr. Pond, Ms. Coughlin, all town buildings. Mr. Anderson recalled that a Facilities Maintenance Lead existed prior to the previous DPW Director. Mr. Batchelder also recommended reducing summer helpers from two to one.

Mr. Batchelder then outlined equipment requests. He proposed purchasing a Ram 5500 to replace the 2014 International Terrastar, which is at the end of its service life due to rust, transmission transfer case issues, emissions problems, and other mechanical concerns. He noted the Ram 5500 does not require a CDL, is more versatile for year-round use, and has a more efficient spreader. Mr. Anderson expressed support, while Mr. Houghton remarked the Terrastar should have lasted longer than 11 years.

Mr. Batchelder also recommended purchasing a Bobcat MT stand-alone track machine to replace the John Deere farm tractor. He explained that outsourcing field work costs approximately \$42,000 annually, not including walking paths, and the Bobcat would allow the Town to perform this work in-house more cost-effectively and address issues promptly. Mr. Hickey added that the equipment would be used extensively on trails and ball fields. The estimated cost is \$50,000, and the machines are readily available. Mr. Anderson and Ms. Knab supported the proposal, while Mr. Houghton preferred to hold off.

Mr. Roache reported that he reviewed the library budget with Ms. Ruest, noting it is flat funded with minimal cost increases. Outside of a 3% increase in salary payroll, there are no significant changes. Mr. Butzel is expected to return to work soon and may wish to elaborate further at the next meeting.

Discussion then turned to the payroll budget. Mr. Houghton suggested including a line item for both authorized headcount and actual headcount. Ms. Knab recalled that in the past, "levers" were presented to the Board and Budget Advisory Committee—larger items that could impact departmental budgets beyond the flat proposals. She noted department heads often presented flat budgets while identifying additional priorities.

Mr. Anderson requested more clarification regarding the Fire Department's budget requests. Mr. Houghton emphasized the need to review revenue versus expenses, expressing concern about potential slush funds across departments. The Board acknowledged the need to determine how much fund balance should be used to offset the budget. Mr. Houghton recalled a policy governing fund balance use and asked Mr. Roache to locate it.

Mr. Roache clarified his questions regarding payroll and the Board continued its review of the budgeting process.

Mr. Roache then addressed the Bunker Hill signalization project, noting that DOT anticipates moving forward with a fully signalized intersection. While no additional funding has been added to the 10-year plan, the scope remains included. Based on his experience, Mr. Roache anticipates that within the next two years, as design work progresses, funding will be amended through the Transportation Improvement Program. He explained that the 10-year plan often

undergoes adjustments, with projects shifting as resources are reallocated. He emphasized the importance of monitoring developments through RPC, as they will be the first to learn of changes, and committed to working with Ms. Price to keep pressure on DOT for updates.

Mr. Roache also reported that a Route 33 Corridor Study is underway, with a consultant hired and initial work begun. The study will make recommendations for transportation improvements along Route 33 from Portsmouth to the Stratham circle. He stressed the importance of developing a vision for how the corridor should function and look, particularly in relation to land use near the park and historic areas. He encouraged strong participation from residents and staff as the study progresses over the coming months.

Mr. Roache reported that DPW Director interviews are underway, with additional interviews to be scheduled. He noted he has a call with DRA to finalize the tax rate; once the Warrant is signed, tax bills will be mailed. He will also follow up with the moderator regarding BAC.

Mr. Roache stated progress continues with the Lane property, with the deed expected next week. Mr. Houghton requested a walkthrough of the property with Mr. Merrill and Mr. Bedard, and Mr. Anderson asked that Mr. Batchelder also participate.

Mr. Roache is working with Ms. Ruest and Mr. Hickey on updates to the employee manual. He is also developing a procedural policy for Right to Know requests, proposing that all requests be directed through him. Ms. Knab requested that the Board be kept informed of such requests.

RESERVATIONS

Mr. Anderson questioned why Annie's Angels requested use of the Hutton Room rather than the Sewall Room. The Board requested additional information from Ms. Richard.

Mr. Houghton noted that Caitlyn Middaugh is up for consideration for the Recreation Commission for a 3 year term.

At 9:07pm Mr. Houghton motioned to adjourn. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Richard
Recording Secretary