

MINUTES OF THE NOVEMBER 3, 2025 SELECT BOARD MEETING

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

ALSO PRESENT: Town Administrator Tim Roache, Finance Administrator Lori Ruest, Police Chief Anthony King, Sgt. Ken Gauthier and Sgt. Michael Doucette, Fire Chief Jeff Denton

At 7:00pm Mr. Houghton opened the meeting and asked for a motion on the minutes. Mr. Anderson motioned to approve the October 20, 2025 Select Board minutes. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor. Ms. Knab motioned to approve the minutes of the October 24, 2025 Select Board Meeting. Mr. Anderson wasn't present at the meeting and therefore abstained. Mr. Houghton seconded the motion. Motion passed.

Mr. Houghton recognized Chief King, who presented the need for a 13th full-time officer. The department currently has 12 full-time positions, including one lieutenant, two patrol sergeants, one detective sergeant, six patrol officers, and one school resource officer who does not perform patrol duties. Officer Jonathan Ballard is expected to attend the Academy in January and begin patrol duties next summer, filling the current vacancy. He continued stating they have four part-time officers allocated but have not been able to fill. The department also consists of one part-time officer, one full-time administrative, one part-time prosecutor and one community resource officer.

Chief King emphasized that officers have responsibilities beyond patrol, with each position carrying specialized functions. For example, Sgt. Gauthier also serves as SIMS instructor, field training officer, wellness officer, training supervisor, reserve officer coordinator, firearms instructor, and armory supervisor.

Sgt. Doucette stated that adding a 13th full-time officer, along with Officer Ballard completing the Academy, will enhance proactive patrols, particularly addressing resident concerns about traffic enforcement. The additional staffing will also improve criminal investigations and support community policing efforts. In response to Mr. Houghton's question, Sgt. Doucette confirmed the 13th officer will allow for more complete coverage.

Sgt. Doucette explained that the department is currently understaffed, impacting coverage during the 4–8 p.m. period, historically the busiest time due to rush hour and increased accidents. Historically, three rotating midnight shifts and a 10 p.m.–8 a.m. shift helped fill this gap.

Mr. Anderson asked if a 13th officer would help reduce overtime caused by staff absences. Sgt. Doucette confirmed it would, noting that overtime is often used to cover the 4–8 p.m. block. A dedicated 10–8 shift would reduce reliance on extended shifts and help target busy periods.

He added that an additional officer would alleviate burnout, improve mental and physical well-being, and allow more time for administrative duties.

Sgt. Gauthier emphasized the need for a 13th officer, referencing a staffing analysis comparing Stratham to similar towns. With 12 officers, Stratham has 1.5 officers per 1,000 residents; adding a 13th would increase that to 1.7, aligning more closely with comparable communities. Chief King noted broader benchmarks: the national average is 3.5 officers per 1,000, with New Hampshire at 2.7. While reaching those levels is unrealistic, he stressed growing demands on the department.

Chief King also explained that although each officer is scheduled for 2,080 hours annually, actual availability averages 1,605 hours due to time off. Military obligations for two officers create overlapping absences, resulting in a 20-hour coverage gap. He noted that newer workforce expectations around time off make it harder to fill shifts, and an additional officer would help reduce overtime and ease staffing pressure.

Workload analysis was discussed using the "rule of three" model: obligated work (calls for service), administrative/report writing, and preventative patrol (area checks and traffic enforcement), each representing roughly equal portions of the workday. Chief King noted the breakdown as 535 hours annually per category. The addition of a 13th officer would help fill patrol gaps when others are occupied with reports or administrative duties, relieving pressure on supervisory staff who have other responsibilities.

Sgt. Doucette elaborated on the workload distribution, noting that while the "rule of three" principle is useful, the actual time spent on obligated work, preventative patrol, and report writing varies based on officer activity. Increased patrol leads to more reports, reducing time on the road.

He outlined that eight officers account for 16,640 compensated hours annually, with 12,840 actual patrol hours. The department currently faces a shortfall of 3,880 patrol hours, requiring approximately 1.8 additional officers to close the gap—closely aligning with the proposed 13th officer, which would bring staffing to 1.71 officers per 1,000 residents.

The additional officer would help reduce overtime, ease administrative burdens, and allow command staff to focus on their duties rather than filling patrol shifts. The department is currently missing a third midnight shift and a 10 a.m.–8 p.m. cover shift, which remains open seven days a week. Sgt. Doucette and Sgt. Gauthier adjust their schedules to help fill this gap.

Sgt. Doucette explained that they meet to review weekly issues on Thursdays. This day also serves as the department's overlap day. Due to the four-on, three-off schedule, staffing is heaviest on Thursdays. This structure supports officers' preference for having full weekends off (Friday–Sunday).

Sgt. Doucette reported that all cover shifts are currently unfilled, including the part-time 12–8 p.m. shifts on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. He and Sgt. Gauthier are often alone during the busy 4–8 p.m. period, frequently relying on mutual aid or overtime due to staffing shortages. Without an order-in policy, coverage depends on voluntary availability.

Sgt Gauthier reiterated that adding a 13th officer would reduce overtime costs and improve coverage during peak hours (day and evening shifts). Currently, the day shift often runs solo, requiring command staff—including the Chief, Lieutenant, and Detective Sergeant—to assist with calls, pulling them away from administrative responsibilities.

Sgt. Gauthier emphasized that implementing a 10 a.m.–8 p.m. shift would significantly improve departmental efficiency and reduce reliance on mutual aid, which often involves delayed response times. He noted that part-time officers have not filled shifts in months, increasing the burden on full-time staff.

Adding a 13th officer would boost morale, support retention, and reduce burnout by distributing workload more evenly. Officers increasingly value work-life balance, and the current staffing levels make that difficult to maintain. The additional officer would also help ensure timely responses to calls, allow for more directed patrols, and reduce the impact of time-consuming paperwork, which can tie up officers for hours. Overall, the position would help fill existing coverage gaps and improve operational capacity.

Chief King thanked the Board for supporting the competitive COGS grant application. It's not as much as we hoped for and the match requirement changed. The department was awarded \$125,000—less than the requested \$347,000—and the grant term was extended from three to five years, which is beneficial to the town. The revised match requirement of approximately \$229,000 now breaks down to an annual match of about \$46,000 through September 30, as confirmed to Mr. Houghton.

Chief King noted he has discussed the budget with Mr. Roache and believes the town can absorb most, if not all, of the match through adjustments to overtime and minor line items. While future growth may impact needs, he believes sustaining 13 officers is feasible for several years.

Mr. Houghton asked about the average cost to put an officer on the street. Chief King stated that first step salary is \$62,000. Benefits, insurance, or retirement costs are through the Town. Ms. Ruest noted the employee share is 30%. Sgt. Doucette added that with annual step increases averaging 3%, the salary could reach approximately \$72,000 over five years, excluding COLA.

Chief King emphasized that while most COGS grants are three years, this one spans five, requiring the town to absorb the full cost by 2030. Mr. Houghton acknowledged that by then, the town may be supporting a 14th officer. Chief King noted a potential retirement next year could help offset future costs.

He also mentioned that the 12th position remains unfilled and the 13th may not be fully staffed until mid-2026. Mr. Houghton commended the grant achievement, and Chief King thanked the Board, offering to answer any further questions.

The Board commended Chief King's presentation. Ms. Knab expressed support for adding a 13th officer, noting that given current vacancies and the evolving status of part-time positions, it is sensible to build in additional staffing capacity.

Chief King noted that last year, the department operated with five staff vacancies for much of the time, making it a particularly challenging period.

Fire Chief Denton expressed strong support for the police department, noting their vital assistance to the Fire Department, particularly at night, and their role as first responders. Chief King commented that the 4-on/3-off schedule is popular but the department continues to evaluate alternatives to meet coverage needs.

Ms. Knab inquired about the vacant SERT officer position asking if there were any candidates or could it be filled internally. Chief King explained it has been posted. His current officers lack the required experience. He added that the NH SERT team remains outstanding, local, and highly responsive.

Chief King reported no major increases in the police budget, noting adjustments were made to accommodate the five-year grant match through reductions in overtime and part-time costs. Increases included a \$9,000 mandatory records management system upgrade from Rockingham dispatch and expanded storage for body-worn cameras. Tasers were purchased outright, with \$8,000 potentially covered by the golf fund. Overall, the budget bottom line remains unchanged.

Mr. Houghton asked about building maintenance, and Chief King explained it covers items such as sally port doors, pest control, and elevator inspections. Mr. Anderson inquired about building door access, and Chief King stated the current system is unsupported and requires an upgrade, with PelMac contacted for solutions. Mr. Anderson suggested coordinating access upgrades across the Police, Fire, and Municipal Center buildings.

Chief King reported that the department's camera server is unsupported and requires an upgrade, which should be addressed as a CIP item. Mr. Houghton suggested the building siding quote be funded through the Building & Grounds Maintenance Fund. Ms. Knab raised a prior bathroom issue, which Chief King confirmed was resolved with retiling.

Mr. Houghton noted building access concerns raised by Chief Denton, suggesting a large RFP process to evaluate options. Chief King recalled the issue was discussed last year and deferred to this year.

Mr. Houghton then moved to the Police Department's two grants. Chief King explained that, to comply with Rockingham Dispatch's transition to Pro-suite, the department upgraded Mobile Data Terminals in cruisers by purchasing tablets. Two cruisers required upgrades, and the grant provides funding for this equipment. Ms. Knab motioned to accept the terms of the FY26 MDT E-Crash equipment grant as presented in the amount of \$25,497.50 and the match of 20% at \$5,099.50 and to further authorize the Town Administrator or Finance Administrator to sign all documents related to the grant on behalf of the Select Board. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Chief King presented a request from Seacoast Crime Stoppers for a donation to purchase a Livescan Fingerprint Machine. He explained the system is ink-free, directly connected to state and national databases, provides faster results, and quickly identifies outstanding felonies or

criminal activity. They would make the machine available for use by other agencies. There is no financial commitment required from the town. Ms. Knab motioned to accept the terms of the IDEMIA Live Scan grant and to further authorize the Town Administrator or Finance Administrator to sign all documents related to the grant on behalf of the Select Board. Mr. Houghton seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton recognized Fire Chief Denton for his budget and department presentation. Chief Denton reported that recent fundraisers—Summerfest, the First Responder Golf Tournament, and the Pancake Breakfast—were all successful. Crews also conducted fire prevention training in schools.

The department's biggest update is the arrival of Fire Engine 1. Training on the new equipment is underway with plans to place the engine in service by the 5th. He'd like to hold a traditional "push ceremony." The new truck carries more water and has improved rescue tool placement for responder safety. The ambulance and cruiser remain at DPW with no bids received yet.

Chief Denton highlighted the benefits of having paramedics in the station, noting improved collaboration between EMS and Fire, high-level training sessions, and increased morale and participation. He also praised Matt Newton's contributions to fire inspections, planning, and development, noting his expertise has eased the chief's workload and provided valuable guidance to the Board and other departments.

Chief Denton reported that he is waiting for the new bay station radios to be programmed. They should be installed soon and will improve communications. The new breathing air compressor has already been installed and is functioning well. These were the major equipment investments this year.

Chief Denton explained that a modification is required because the old engine utilized a stack system, while the new engine operates with a different configuration that does not fit within the existing bay. The plan is to remove the old system and retrofit it to the hose system currently used on the tanker and other trucks. The estimated cost is approximately \$8,000, and the department is awaiting delivery of the necessary parts. The station's Wi-Fi security system also needs upgrading, with Block 5 preparing a quote which he will share with the Board.

Budget priorities focus on increasing pay rates for firefighters, EMTs, and paramedics, as the department relies on a per diem model and has struggled to fill authorized positions leaving this line item underspent. Chief Denton noted staffing challenges due to military deployments and the departure of key personnel. While the department has successfully hired some new staff, they have been unable to fill the long-term 30-hour per week position. Chief Denton brought forward a request for creating an EMS Training Coordinator position with a \$5,000 stipend for a paramedic who has been instrumental in delivering high-level training. He emphasized the importance of sustaining training momentum, given that EMS accounts for about 70% of department activity.

Chief Denton outlined several budget priorities:

- **Paid Training:** Requested compensation for members attending mandatory training (four hours per month), at a flat rate of \$20/hour, incorporated into the personnel line.
- **Fire Gear:** Requested 10 new sets of gear at \$1,000 each to equip new personnel and replace expiring gear, with leasing proposed for probationary members.
- **Engine Replacement:** Recommended including replacement of Engine 3 (2008 model) in the CIP/CRF, with authorization in 2026 to ensure delivery by 2028 given current 2–4 year lead times.
- **Ambulance Equipment:** Reported that both defibrillator monitors are at end of service life and require replacement at a total cost of \$100,000.

Chief Denton reported working with the Finance Administrator on the budget and advocated raising crew pay rates, noting Stratham provides stronger fire protection at lower cost compared to neighboring communities. Minor increases were noted in dues and motor vehicle maintenance.

He highlighted that the Knox box and Lucas device were purchased with golf tournament donations. This year's golf tournament funds will be used to purchase a vent.

Chief Denton expressed concern that EMS supply costs exceeded the warrant article limit, with necessary purchases being covered under dues. Ms. Ruest recommended drafting a warrant article with broader language to allow greater flexibility.

He also outlined a proposed reimbursement policy for paramedic training, developed with Paramedic Herschel Van Lubin. Under the policy, paramedics would pay for school upfront, with the department reimbursing \$1,000 annually upon completion, ensuring personal investment and retention. Chief Denton explained that becoming a paramedic requires completion of school and several years of training experience, which Stratham's call volume alone cannot provide. Members will need to gain experience both in Stratham and elsewhere. Greta Nudd, graduating in December, will serve as the test case. Chief Denton plans to refine the policy and present it to the Board, with potential application to EMS and fire training.

Ms. Knab expressed support, noting the policy demonstrates the Town's commitment to training and retention, making it a benefit of serving with Stratham Fire.

Chief Denton agreed to provide additional detailed information. The Board noted the volume of material would require time for review and thanked him for his presentation.

Mr. Roache reviewed the Planning budget as submitted by Ms. Price to the Finance Administrator, noting no significant changes. Payroll saw a slight adjustment; RPC dues increased to reflect inflation; software costs were reduced by \$1,000; and training was modestly increased.

Discussion included the vehicle assigned to the Building Department, with concern that mileage charges were being applied to Planning despite the vehicle being available for use by the Building Inspector. Mr. Houghton questioned why mileage was being reimbursed if a truck is provided.

The MRI consulting line item for the interim contract Planner was zeroed out. Overall, the budget remains essentially flat with no issues identified.

The Building Department budget reflects a slight payroll adjustment and a modest increase in software licensing. Vehicle maintenance costs pertain to the department's truck, which should be utilized by the Building Inspector to offset mileage expenses. A Surface Pro tablet was added under the cell phone line item. Given the small size of the budget, even minor changes have a noticeable impact.

Mr. Roache reviewed the Administration budget, noting he is still familiarizing himself with the details. Association dues are approximately \$10,000, with NHMA accounting for \$9,000. Contracts were elevated likely due to MRI's Town Administrator search. He questioned the Meetings & Meals line item, which appeared high; Ms. Knab noted no staff event occurred this year. The plan is to flat fund it. Mr. Roache also raised concern about copier costs, and Ms. Ruest explained the main contract covers six to seven copiers, with one supplemental contract, while the clerk's copier is funded separately.

Ms. Knab highlighted Ms. Richard's memo regarding the welfare budget, noting concerns it has not been adjusted upward. Mr. Roache confirmed Ms. Richard had raised the issue with him and is willing to discuss further. Ms. Ruest added that service providers may be able to assist, and Ms. Knab questioned whether they might increase funding requests.

Mr. Roache concluded that the overall Administration budget is expected to be lower than last year.

Mr. Roache reviewed the Assessing budget, noting he has not yet met with Steve Hamilton. Questions were raised regarding increased dues, with Ms. Knab asking whether they were for an Assessing Association for our Assessing Assistant. She felt they should be covered under our assessing contract.

Mr. Anderson inquired if a portion of Whitney Consulting's costs had been placed in the CIP. Ms. Knab noted Assessing has a Revaluation line item, and the Board discussed what was included in Whitney's contract. Ms. Ruest clarified it was an assessing proposal. The Board was not aware of it. Mr. Houghton requested a side-by-side comparison of the existing agreement and the new 2026 proposal, including the addendum, to review changes. The Board emphasized that only cyclical inspections had been agreed to and further discussion is needed on the revaluation schedule.

Ms. Ruest asked about auditor contracts, and Mr. Anderson confirmed there is no multi-year agreement. Mr. Roache questioned whether contracted services should be included in the CIP and will examine this further.

Mr. Houghton inquired as to which line item legal costs came out of. Ms. Ruest noted there are several miscellaneous lines and will review further with the Town Administrator.

Mr. Houghton commended Town Counsel but raised concern that legal costs are significant and questioned the process by which staff may contact Counsel directly. He suggested some inquiries appear to be entry-level matters that could be managed more cost-effectively. Mr. Anderson felt that all legal questions should be routed through the Town Administrator. Ms. Ruest added that NHMA's legal team can address certain issues within defined parameters and would refer matters outside their scope. She noted that the warrant will require review by Counsel.

Mr. Houghton directed attention to the CIP. Mr. Roache will contact Department Heads to bring forward their full budgets, with CIP included. Ms. Ruest noted she has multiple CIP sources—an expenditure report from 2025 and questions about what can be carried into 2026—and is unclear on the process. Mr. Roache reported having information from DPW, Fire, and Police, though not in a consistent format. Mr. Houghton requested a comprehensive package for Board review, with each Department Head presenting their budget and CIP together. He also suggested Ms. Ruest compile both 2025 and requested 2026 amounts.

Mr. Anderson asked when the Board would see a first draft of the full budget. Ms. Ruest explained that the Board typically previews department head presentations, which are reflected in her spreadsheets, but she still needs to research and verify formulas. Personnel administration is factored last, unless based on 2025 rates rather than 2026. Some departments are using a 3% increase, others are not. The Board agreed to apply a 3% COLA as a placeholder. Bonuses are one-time only and are not to be carried forward. The Rockingham County warrant is up 10%.

Mr. Roache outlined strategic initiatives to improve operations, focusing on IT and networking. He has been working with Mr. Hickey and Block 5 to explore enhancements such as expanded use of MS365, including SharePoint, cloud-based storage, and Teams for internal communications. He emphasized the need for clear guidelines, particularly regarding 91A requests, and additional training to maximize these tools. The Board expressed support.

Mr. Roache proposed weekly meetings with Ms. Ruest and Mr. Hickey on the off-weeks from department head meetings. Ms. Knab noted his training line was reduced, and the Board supported ensuring training resources are available.

He also identified a lack of formal written policies for items such as reimbursements and short-term disability, noting current practices are informal.

Mr. Roache reported increased costs related to the Stevens Park project, specifically the pavilion and drainage. Mr. Houghton requested Mr. Hickey be prepared to explain the project impacts.

At 8:58 pm Mr. Houghton motioned to go into a non-public session in accordance with RSA 91-A:3, II (a) Personnel. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. Roll call: Houghton-yes; Knab-yes; Anderson-yes

At 9:37 pm Mr. Houghton motioned to exit the non-public session. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Ms. Knab motioned to approve the Seacoast Beekeepers to use the Sewall Room for their monthly meetings and to waive the fee as they are a non-profit.

Mr. Anderson moved to waive the alcohol prohibition for the Fire Dept holiday party on December 6. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Employee Jim Joseph requesting use of the Sewall Room. Mr. Anderson motioned to approve Jim Joseph's use of the Sewall Room on November 22 and waive the fee and alcohol prohibition. Mr. Houghton seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Anderson noted we approved the line stripper at the last meeting, but the item they approved was discontinued. Mr. Anderson motioned to authorize the purchase a GREGO line laser at a cost of \$11,189. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton moved to road naming item on the agenda. Mr. Roache said the requestor is asking which names were approved and why the others weren't approved. They reviewed the prior meeting where the proposed names were discussed. They referenced the road Naming Policy noting one of the proposed names is a historic reference. There are examples in town where an exception to the policy exists. The board decided to request the Heritage Commission and Conservation Commission weigh in on the proposed names.

At 9:48pm Mr. Houghton motioned to adjourn. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Richard
Recording Secretary