

## **MINUTES OF THE DECEMBER 1, 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, Police Chief Anthony King, Fire Chief Jeff Denton, Departmental Administrative Coordinator Britt Fowle

Mr. Anderson motioned approval of the November 17, 2025 minutes. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton recognized Chief King, who reviewed proposed adjustments to Detail rates, noting they are based on Rockingham County rates and part of an ongoing step program. The target rate of \$70 is anticipated within the next year or two. Cruiser rates include maintenance costs, and Chief King stated the Town has steadily increased rates over time.

Ms. Knab inquired about weekend versus weekday rates; Chief King confirmed the Board previously agreed to an \$80 rate for emergency/holiday details. In response to Mr. Houghton's question, Chief King clarified that if another agency fills a detail, that agency's rate applies.

Ms. Knab motioned support for the detail rate adjustment for 2026 – 2028 as outlined in Chief King's memo dated November 13. Mr. Houghton seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Chief King presented the employee wellness program initiative. He reported meeting with a counselor who was introduced to all department employees during a mandatory meeting. A statewide group of counselors has coordinated to provide services at a cost of \$1,800 annually (\$150 per officer). The assigned counselor would conduct annual check-ins with officers, with any recommendations for further counseling referred to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Chief King noted that EAP is not currently addressed in the employee manual and emphasized the importance of including it.

He highlighted the value of wellness programs for both police officers and townwide employees, referencing HealthTrust's recommendations and his work with Ms. Ruest on updating policies. Under the proposal, officers would meet with the counselor around their birthday and receive a wellness day off, which would be "use it or lose it." Chief King confirmed he can fund the program in 2026 from his budget.

Mr. Houghton voiced support. Ms. Knab also supported the concept but stressed the need to consider impacts on all staff when making personnel policy changes. Chief King responded that he believes all first responders should receive a wellness day. Mr. Anderson expressed support. Mr. Houghton concluded that the Board will revisit the discussion in the broader context raised by Ms. Knab and provide a decision. Ms. Knab clarified she is not opposed but wants to be thoughtful about implementation. Chief King asked if he may proceed with the counseling contract, with the wellness day component to be considered separately at a later time.

Mr. Houghton motioned to authorize Chief King to engage with the third party practitioner to provide counseling to officers at cost of \$1,800 out of 2025 budget dollars. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor. The wellness day consideration warrants a broader discussion. The Board said they will get back to Chief King.

Mr. Houghton recognized Gale Lyon, Library Trustee Chair, who discussed renovation projects at the Library. Ms. Lyon reported that \$7,000 remains from funds allocated to the bathroom renovation project and requested guidance on whether the funds could be used to install a sight window in the assistant director's office at a cost of \$5,000.

The Board discussed whether the funds were restricted solely to bathroom renovations. Ms. Lyon asked about the threshold for CIP projects; the Board noted no specific amount had been determined. Mr. Anderson suggested establishing a policy. Mr. Houghton explained that CIP line items typically carry forward year to year, with unused funds rolling into the General Fund after five years. Ms. Ruest asked whether carried-forward funds must remain dedicated to the original project or could be repurposed. Mr. Roache confirmed \$7,400 remains from the bathroom project. Mr. Houghton stated he was inclined to approve the window project as a "library improvement." Ms. Knab agreed. Ms. Lyon thanked the Board for their support.

Mr. Houghton recognized Chief Denton, who presented an overview of Fire Department challenges and priorities. Chief Denton emphasized that pay rates are a significant issue, particularly in recruiting and retaining firefighter EMTs. He noted the department recently lost a qualified candidate to another agency offering higher compensation. To remain competitive and sustain a paid call/volunteer model rather than transitioning to a full-time department, he recommended raising rates and considering step increases. He stressed the need for a defined plan beyond cost-of-living adjustments, as other departments offer structured pay progression. Mr. Anderson suggested requesting annual pay increases for the crew; Chief Denton agreed this could be considered in the future.

Chief Denton highlighted that the department is performing well, covering most calls including medic calls, and has seen improvements in training and qualifications. He cautioned, however, that losing even one or two trained personnel could severely impact operations. He reiterated the importance of investing financially in rates to retain staff and sustain momentum. He also requested consideration of a training coordinator position and funding for paid training, which has been requested for several years but not yet implemented.

Training attendance has increased significantly due to engaging, hands-on sessions that integrate fire and EMS.

Mr. Houghton returned to payroll, reviewing past figures and asking what had changed. Chief Denton explained that payroll now includes the paramedic coordinator, paramedics scheduled seven days a week (one paramedic and three firefighter EMTs per day shift), two night shift stipends, as well as the fire inspector and administrative coordinator. He noted that the department is not requesting additional positions beyond current staffing. A spreadsheet reflects current rates and proposed adjustments, allowing for scenario analysis of total costs based on shifts and average annual call volume.

Mr. Anderson noted that the proposed payroll spreadsheet assumes 100% staffing of shifts, though the department is not yet fully staffed. Chief Denton acknowledged improvement since the beginning of the year but reiterated that current pay rates hinder recruitment. He emphasized the need to move toward higher rates to attract firefighter EMTs, where staffing remains most challenging.

Mr. Anderson and Ms. Knab agreed that a rate increase is warranted, though the appropriate level requires further consideration. Mr. Anderson suggested aligning with the average of surrounding towns initially, with adjustments in subsequent years. Chief Denton argued Stratham must offer above-average rates to remain competitive, as the department relies exclusively on per diem firefighters, unlike other departments that supplement full-time staff with per diems. He cautioned that losing even one per diem working 30 hours weekly would significantly impact operations.

Mr. Houghton observed that per diems generally do not receive benefits. Chief Denton confirmed, noting that per diem positions are often stepping stones to full-time careers, where employees benefit from overtime and healthcare. He stressed that Stratham's only competitive advantage is offering higher-than-average pay.

Mr. Anderson highlighted differences in pay between part-time and full-time positions, as well as single versus dual certifications, referencing an Exeter firefighter paramedic posting. Chief Denton explained that Exeter supports EMTs through paramedic school while on shift, whereas Stratham lacks the call volume to qualify paramedics. He reiterated the goal of making Stratham competitive enough to attract and retain staff.

Following discussion, the Board agreed to revisit the department's payroll in greater detail at a later time.

Mr. Anderson moved to the budget item for trainings. Chief Denton explained that his proposed budget provides funding for all crew members to attend trainings. Mr. Anderson expressed support for paid training. Chief Denton noted that other towns compensate for training, and our doing so would help establish stronger attendance standards.

Chief Denton then proposed creating an EMS Training Coordinator position. He highlighted one paramedic who has been highly effective in developing and leading in-house training programs, including one-on-one sessions for new staff. He emphasized that this initiative arose from the crew itself and has become a significant benefit to the department. Recognizing her prior experience in this role, he stressed the importance of retaining her skills, noting that the department currently has some of the best paramedics in the state and does not want to lose them.

Chief Denton suggested funding the position through the EMS fund, proposing a \$5,000 stipend. He explained that this would support retention and recognize the additional work being done.

Chief Denton discussed the need for additional firefighter gear, noting that new personnel are joining the department and not all currently have two sets. The goal is to acquire 10 additional sets this year. He explained that prior gear purchases were funded through donations and fundraisers rather than the budget. Gear costs continue to rise, and while PFAS-free gear is now available, it is more expensive. The department's new standard is to purchase PFAS-free gear, with the long-term goal of replacing all existing PFAS-containing equipment.

Mr. Houghton asked about the building maintenance line item. Chief Denton reported that \$8,000 was spent to retrofit the facility to accommodate the new engine, in addition to routine expenses such as wear and tear and pest control.

Chief Denton raised concerns regarding the EMS supply line item. He explained that the warrant article created last year for EMS supplies was fully expended by September, and because it was

specifically earmarked, no additional purchases could be made from that line. Subsequent expenses were charged to general supplies, with staff tracking EMS versus general items separately. The previous Finance Administrator advised moving EMS supplies entirely to the revolving fund, so there is no longer an EMS supply line item in the operating budget. Chief Denton emphasized the need for a “shock absorber” in this line due to variable expenses, which have increased with the addition of paramedic-level services. He noted that the current Finance Administrator recommended a warrant article consolidating these expenses into one allocation, with examples listed, to allow flexibility if costs exceed projections.

For CIP/CRF planning, Chief Denton reported that the department is preparing to replace Engine 3. Initial cost estimates range from \$1.15 to \$1.25 million, compared to \$900,000 for the most recent truck purchase. He recommended authorizing the purchase in 2026 to account for lead times, with payment anticipated in 2027 or 2028. Options include purchasing a stock truck that can be modified to meet department needs, as lead times for stock trucks are approximately one year, while custom builds may take up to three years. He cautioned that costs will continue to rise the longer the purchase is delayed and stated that the department will return to the Board with more information once options are further reviewed.

Chief Denton emphasized the urgent need to purchase new defibrillator monitors for each ambulance. He explained that the monitors are essential to qualify the ambulances, and the current units are at the end of their service life. The cost for two monitors (one per ambulance) is approximately \$130,000, with an expected seven-year service life. He identified this as a priority item for the department.

Chief Denton also noted significant progress in modernizing the station, including the acquisition of compressors and radios, which have positioned the department well for the future. He stated that only a few remaining items are needed to complete the modernization efforts. The Board thanked him for his presentation.

Mr. Houghton recognized John Cushing, who spoke regarding plans for the America 250 celebration next year. The committee intends to coordinate the celebration with Summerfest, continuing the traditional one-day event while adding a softball game with fireworks on the preceding Thursday. The Thursday scheduling allows time for 4-H animals to be brought in on Friday and settled before Saturday’s activities.

Mr. Cushing requested that the Town consider sharing in the cost of fireworks and noted the committee’s interest in reviving the chicken/lobster lunch tradition. The committee is seeking \$18,000 in funding. He emphasized that he was not requesting a decision at this meeting but asked the Board to consider the proposal.

Mr. Houghton recognized Maynard Jackson to present the proposed swap shop at the Transfer Station. Mr. Jackson explained the concept, modeled after Durham’s swap shop, with modifications to fit Stratham’s needs. The goal is to reduce landfill waste by allowing residents to exchange usable items at no cost. The committee estimates annual savings of approximately \$60,000.

Lucy Cushman stated they are seeking \$40,000 to construct a 24x24 building and asked whether this could be presented as a Warrant Article. She noted that a potential reconfiguration of the Transfer Station could incorporate the swap shop, as the current site cannot accommodate the

building. Exeter Lumber and Seacoast School of Technology have expressed willingness to assist with construction. Electronics would require a drop-off fee, and the shop would be volunteer-run, with 17 volunteers already committed. Items not claimed would be redirected to donation sites. The shop would not operate during the winter. Tom Jarvela added that the swap shop could serve as a community hub and provide added value to the town. The Board thanked them for the presentation.

Mr. Houghton then asked Mr. Roache to review the CIP. Mr. Roache began with computer-related items. Mr. Houghton emphasized the importance of understanding 2026 appropriations, specifically questioning a \$75,000 allocation for permitting software, noting he had not seen proposals. The Board discussed the need to proceed judiciously with this item. Additional items reviewed included network switch upgrades, wireless internet access upgrades, internet backup for the police department camera server, and LED lighting for the municipal building. Mr. Anderson questioned whether the cemetery item should be considered an operating expense. Ms. Knab noted that recent changes to fund access should allow those expenses to be covered.

The Board moved to Parks and Facilities. Mr. Roache reviewed upcoming expenses for Stevens Park. Ms. Knab asked about dugouts; Mr. Hickey noted he has a volunteer and potential donations, but as they are not yet confirmed, the project was not included in the budget.

Discussion turned to Stratham Hill Park, the ten-year plan, and other DPW projects. Mr. Hickey reported several projects remain to be completed. Ms. Knab inquired about funds allocated to the fire tower project; Mr. Hickey confirmed some funds exist, though limited. Ms. Knab emphasized the need to prioritize the tower for safety reasons. Proposed park improvements include the barn roof and bathrooms. The fire tower project, initially scoped as painting, was determined to require more extensive work.

In response to Mr. Houghton's question regarding the master plan with UNH, Mr. Hickey stated the RFP is in draft form.

The Board reviewed funds allocated to paving, the open space plan, and the assessing contract. Mr. Houghton noted the need to determine the timing of the next revaluation, as the current contract only covers cyclical work. Ms. Knab suggested setting aside funds annually to prepare for the next revaluation and avoid a budget spike. The Board also discussed funds allocated to PFAS mediation.

The Board discussed appropriations and reviewed which items could be removed, reduced, or deferred to future years in order to decrease the overall budget.

Mr. Anderson motioned to authorize the Town Administrator to purchase a Skaag Jackyl and Harley rack for \$43,000 out of DPW new equipment operating line. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

The Board discussed Capital Reserve town building projects, including the transfer station redesign and rekeying of municipal buildings. An RFP for rekeying has been drafted. Discussion ensued as to whether all buildings would be included in the rekeying. Ms. Knab requested that the CRF reflect the Conservation Commission and Heritage line items, noting that no additional funding is being requested for those areas this year.

Mr. Roache moved to the Town Administration budget. Ms. Ruest noted difficulty reconciling the highway payroll and discovered that payroll expenses were being allocated across four budget lines: 80% to highway, 5% to cemetery, 10% to sanitation, and 5% to parks. She suggested revising this approach.

The Board discussed vacant DPW positions, which were not included in the 2025 budget but are reflected in the 2026 figures. Overtime costs were also identified as a factor to be considered. Ms. Ruest indicated she would review whether combining line items could provide greater clarity in the overall budget.

The group continued discussion of budget variables, including healthcare costs, and briefly addressed the anticipated impact of schools on the tax rate next year.

Mr. Anderson motioned to close the town office at 12:30pm on Christmas Eve. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

#### CORRESPONDENCE

Mr. Roache addressed correspondence from Councilor Stevens regarding concerns that funding for the Bunker Hill signalization project could be lost, noting there will be no public comment at the upcoming GACIT hearing.

He reported that additional interviews will be conducted for the DPW Director position, with a decision expected before year-end. He provided an update on the Lane property, stating final paperwork is pending, and noted ongoing work to clarify Assistant Town Administrator responsibilities, some of which are currently being handled by Mr. Hickey but should fall under Ms. Ruest.

Mr. Roache briefly mentioned a potential request to use the Sewall Room and raised an issue with a resident posting “no trespassing” signs on a public access road.

Mr. Anderson motioned to accept the resignation of Officer Shawn Walmsley from the Police Department. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Anderson then motioned to authorize the Town Administrator to make a conditional offer of employment to reclassify Ken Lundberg of the DPW from seasonal part-time Parks Maintenance Lead to permanent part-time year-round Parks Maintenance Lead at the current rate of \$20/hour. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

#### RESERVATIONS

Mr. Houghton addressed a request from New Life Baptist Church to use the Sewall Room on Sundays in 2026, consistent with prior years. The Board asked Ms. Richard to gather additional information.

Mr. Anderson raised a request from Annie’s Angels to continue using the Hutton Room for monthly Board meetings. While acknowledging the organization’s value, he did not support their use of the space. Ms. Knab expressed support. The Board discussed concerns about potential room reservation conflicts and noted they could use the Sewall Room, though it will incur additional work for staff. Mr. Houghton agreed with Mr. Anderson’s position.

**APPOINTMENTS**

Mr. Houghton noted that Casey Jurevich is under consideration to fill the vacant 3 year full member position on the Recreation Commission.

Ms. Knab motioned to appoint Caitlyn Middaugh to fill a vacant full member position on the Recreation Commission for a 3 year term ending at town meeting 2028. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Roache reported receiving correspondence complimenting Mr. Lundberg's work at the park; the letter will be placed in his personnel file.

Ms. Knab suggested planning a holiday party next year and/or a spring/summer employee gathering. The Board discussed providing staff gift cards this year.

Ms. Knab revisited Chief King's request regarding wellness days. Mr. Houghton noted that Chief King is developing a comprehensive wellness program for his staff, with the proposed day off serving as recognition of their participation. He noted that such a program does not currently exist for town employees, highlighting the distinction, and acknowledging the high-stress nature of police work. Mr. Houghton motioned to move forward in support of Chief King's request to implement an officer wellness program within the Stratham Police Dept. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

At 9:45 pm Mr. Houghton motioned to adjourn. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Richard  
Recording Secretary