

MINUTES OF THE DECEMBER 15, 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, Planning and Building Director Vanessa Price

Mr. Houghton asked for a motion on the draft minutes. Ms. Knab motioned to approve the minutes of the December 1, 2025 Select Board meeting. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton moved to Ms. Ruest for financial reports. Ms. Ruest had nothing new to report.

Mr. Houghton invited Ms. Price to present her department report. Ms. Price stated she is working with the Planning Board on eight proposed zoning amendments, most of which are technical. Two amendments relate to residential open space cluster development, including removal of the array housing provision and potential elimination of density bonuses. The Board is also considering strengthening zoning within the Route 33 Legacy Highway Heritage District.

Ms. Price reported that the Building Coordinator has spent the past year researching online permitting options. The previous vendor, Brightly, was unsuccessful, and staff are seeking a more effective system that would allow online submissions and provide permit tracking. Fire and DPW may also benefit from such a system. Current data is housed in Avitar, which lacks online permitting capability, and would need to be migrated to any new platform. Quotes received to date are as high as \$60,000. The Administrative Coordinator continues to research options.

Ms. Knab emphasized the need for a thorough, cross-departmental evaluation process—including Finance—to avoid repeating past issues and cautioned against rushing the decision. Mr. Houghton noted the topic has not been before the Board for some time and stressed the importance of reviewing RFPs and allowing Board engagement before moving forward. Mr. Anderson inquired about funding; Mr. Roache stated that while there is a CIP line, no funds are proposed for 2026, though \$10,000 remains from 2020.

Ms. Price said that, if the Board is open to pursuing the project, staff will continue refining vendor specifications. She noted that few applicants currently request online applications. Mr. Houghton, speaking from his experience as a contractor, observed that Stratham is one of the few Seacoast communities without online permitting and that such a system would improve efficiency and data accessibility. Mr. Roache asked whether he might have recommendations; Mr. Houghton said his staff could provide input. Ms. Price added that systems used by larger communities can cost upwards of \$150,000, though increased permitting fees may help offset implementation costs.

Ms. Price provided an update on impact fees, noting that the Planning Board is divided on whether they should be incorporated into the zoning ordinance. She informed the Board that the Rockingham Planning Commission will give a presentation on January 7 and invited members to attend.

She reported that the Planning Department will soon request a bond release for the Rollins Hill Development. The ZBA has updated its Rules of Procedure, and the Planning Board will update its own Rules of Procedure at its next meeting.

Ms. Price reviewed current Planning Board activity, noting no active open projects. A design request off Stoney Brook Drive will be reviewed by the Conservation Commission. She also provided updates on five conditionally approved projects:

- 217 Portsmouth Avenue has submitted its final plan.
- 80–80R Winnicutt Road, a 48-unit residential open space cluster subdivision, is going before the ZBA tomorrow.
- No progress has been made on 41 Portsmouth Avenue (KIA dealership).
- Lindt will extend its fire lane per the Fire Chief's recommendation.
- A condominium lot for an existing duplex has been approved.

She noted five additional projects approved by the Planning Board, including 89–91 Portsmouth Avenue, Windsong Place (under development), Aberdeen West cooperative solar, and a small ground-mounted solar installation at 11 Squamscott Road.

Ms. Price reported that Mr. Durrance is conducting a groundwater reclassification, which occurs periodically for certain residential and commercial properties.

She expressed interest in obtaining a credit card machine for her department and is working with Finance, noting increased public requests for this option.

Ms. Price concluded with an update on building permits, reporting that permit volume is down by approximately 150 from last year, with 890 permits issued to date compared to 1,049 in 2024. School improvement projects have generated an increase in fees.

Ms. Knab asked about the status of the road names previously reviewed by the Conservation Commission. Ms. Price reported that the applicant did not agree with the proposed names and has submitted alternatives, which she is now reviewing with E911.

At 7:24pm Mr. Houghton motioned to go into a non-public session in accordance with RSA 91-A, II(a) personnel. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. Roll call: Houghton-yes; Knab-yes, Anderson-yes. At 7:42pm Mr. Houghton motioned to exit the non-public session. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton noted the Lane Property closing documents were received today and suggested the other Board members read them.

Mr. Roache said there was a request for a vacation payout of 40 hours from Chief King. He said our policy is to allow staff to carry over 80 hours and anything beyond that is paid out at 50% by default unless a request is made in writing by December 1 to the Select Board to have up to 40 hours paid at 100% which is what Chief King did. Ms. Knab motioned to authorize the Finance Administrator to pay out Chief King for his 40 hours of vacation time. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Next they discussed the referral bonus payout for Mike Blake referring Ken Lundberg. Mr. Lundberg began employment as a seasonal part-time, but has transitioned to a permanent part-time.

Mr. Roache continued his report, noting ongoing discussions with Ms. Ruest regarding internal finance controls. Ms. Ruest has proposed new controls aimed at improving efficiency and accuracy, ensuring revenues and expenses are recorded correctly in their intended accounts. They have identified instances where journal entries were billed and posted to incorrect accounts, likely due to transitions between Finance Administrators. Ms. Ruest is also working with Ms. Bakie to streamline the posting of tax payments. Mr. Anderson motioned to approve the internal control procedures of payroll and accounts payable funds as outlined in this week's packet. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Roache referenced a legal engagement letter from DTC regarding representation for tax abatement cases, noting that the recommendation came from Town Counsel. In response to Mr. Houghton's question, he confirmed that Mr. Hamilton of Whitney Consulting participated in the discussion with counsel. Mr. Houghton asked Mr. Roache to confirm whether Mr. Hamilton will continue working with any of the three abatement cases.

Mr. Houghton moved to accept the DTC engagement letter and authorize the Town Administrator to sign it. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Roache then provided an update on the Fire Tower project, referencing a report from HEB Engineers. Two proposals were received from the 2023 RFP—one for \$205,000 and one for \$45,000. HEB advised that the scope of work is significantly greater than the lower estimate. The Board discussed two options: requesting an updated proposal from the higher-priced vendor or issuing a new RFP.

Mr. Houghton suggested presenting the project to voters as a warrant article, proposing full rehabilitation of the Fire Tower at a cost up to \$250,000, based on engineering assessments and prior RFP results. Mr. Anderson asked about funding, and Mr. Houghton confirmed it would be tax-funded. Ms. Knab expressed concern about moving forward without sufficient information and asked what would happen if the article were voted down.

Mr. Anderson recommended issuing a new RFP while also placing the project on the warrant to obtain a more accurate cost estimate. Ms. Ruest suggested issuing an RFQ instead, noting that a less burdensome process might attract more responses. The Board discussed the higher-priced vendor's qualifications. Ms. Knab asked whether the work could be completed in phases.

The Board ultimately agreed to issue a new RFP.

Mr. Roache reported that a parcel of land has become available, with details provided in a memo from Mr. Hickey included in the packet. Ms. Knab recommended that the matter be reviewed first by the Conservation Commission, noting that acquisitions are typically funded through the Land Conservation Fund, which currently holds approximately \$1 million, with \$500,000 encumbered. She explained that the parcel is landlocked and, given the Town's acquisition of the Ross Brothers property, development of the area is now more difficult. She noted that assessments tend to be low and that the Town's past practice has been to offer twice the assessed value. She expressed concern that the owners could restrict access to an existing trail if the Town does not act. Ms. Knab supported acquiring the parcel at twice the assessed value. Mr. Houghton agreed, stating the request should go to the Conservation Commission for a recommendation before following established practices. Ms. Knab also mentioned prior discussions with the Southeast Land Trust regarding conserving woodlot parcels to prevent future development.

Mr. Roache then addressed the Town's ISO rating related to water supply and the Fire Department's response capabilities, including water capacity, response times, and apparatus availability. Fire Chief Denton is working to address identified issues and improve the rating. Mr. Anderson asked whether the rating is broken down into components; Mr. Roache confirmed that it is and provided a general explanation. He commended Chief Denton for documenting cistern locations and noted that staff will continue working collaboratively.

Mr. Roache also provided an update on a small orphaned parcel with unclear ownership. Mr. Blaine has been attempting to determine ownership for years. When Portsmouth Avenue was shifted south, a small piece of land was left isolated. Mr. Blaine and Ms. Richard reviewed meeting minutes from 1961–1963 but found no reference to the parcel. He is now seeking information from DOT. Mr. Houghton noted that Copley Properties is pursuing development in the area and may have relevant information. He asked Mr. Roache to follow up with Ms. Price.

Mr. Roache reported that the Animal Control Officer has submitted his resignation. Ms. Knab expressed regret, noting he has done an excellent job. Mr. Roache agreed, stating he has heard only positive feedback about his work. Mr. Anderson motioned to accept the resignation of Ryan Guerette from the position of Community Service Officer effective December 19, 2025. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor. Mr. Houghton asked if we are pursuing a replacement. Mr. Roache said he will be meeting with Chief King on Wednesday morning.

They reviewed the annual holiday schedule.

Mr. Anderson noted that the November invoice from Town Counsel exceeded \$7,500, against an annual attorney-fee budget of \$40,000. He acknowledged that the Lane property contributed to the increase but also observed significant interaction between Town Counsel, Ms. Price, and Paramedic Van Lubin. He asked whether a process should be in place before staff contact Town Counsel directly.

Mr. Roache agreed the legal costs were high and stated that staff should make greater use of alternative resources, such as NHMA, peer communities, or RPC for land-use matters. He will remind staff to be more selective in seeking legal guidance. He also noted that he proposed the \$40,000 budget before learning of the engagement letter with DTC. The Board agreed that a formal process for contacting Town Counsel is needed.

Mr. Roache gave an informational update on Aquarian noting the purchase is on hold by the Connecticut Public Utilities Regulatory Authority.

They discussed the request from the New Baptist church to continue to use the Sewall Room on Sundays. Decision was held pending additional information.

Ms. Knab motioned to appoint Casey Jurvich to the Recreation Commission for a three year term to end at town meeting 2026. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton led a discussion on the future planning process for Stratham Hill Park, noting significant community interest and the need for broader input. He recommended pausing current efforts and convening a cross-section of representatives from Town committees and interested stakeholders to develop a long-term vision for the park. Once a unified vision is established, an expert could be engaged to refine the plan. He emphasized that the process should be commissioned by the Select Board, which has authority over Town properties, and should include the Conservation Commission, Heritage Commission, and Recreation Commission.

Mr. Anderson noted that the discussion originated from the Stratham Hill Park Association's (SHPA) request for a park budget, and the Board's response that a long-range plan was needed first. Ms. Knab added that when SHPA presented their proposal to her, she advised that a broader, multi-group conversation was necessary. She expressed concern about SHPA's current \$75,000 proposal and felt community outreach was essential. The Board discussed the possibility of a charrette, potentially facilitated by the Rockingham Planning Commission, followed by a public hearing for community input. Mr. Houghton also supported addressing necessary maintenance items at the park.

Ms. Knab noted that some recent SHPA decisions appear to have been made without DPW involvement or coordination with other stakeholders, and she emphasized the value of keeping all groups informed. Mr. Houghton agreed, highlighting the importance of ensuring all voices are included in the process and reaffirming that DPW operates under the direction of the Town Administrator and Select Board. He reiterated that proposals from any Board or Commission should be routed through the Town Administrator and Select Board for approval.

The Board discussed SHPA's status, noting it is not a Town committee. Ms. Knab observed that the proposed tree orchard may not align with the existing forestry management plan and suggested that further coordination would be helpful. Mr. Roache will attend the next SHPA meeting to convey the Board's guidance and clarify that the Select Board is the authority over park decisions. Ms. Knab also noted that the Heritage Commission is exploring designation of the park as a historic site, though support for that effort is uncertain.

The Board agreed to place a temporary "time out" on park projects while a coordinated planning process is established. Mr. Anderson will share SHPA's 1993 bylaws with the Board and Mr. Roache.

Mr. Roache reviewed the CIP using the updated format. He noted a long list of workstation replacements but stated that sufficient funds remain in the 2025 CIP, so no additional funding is requested for 2026. Mr. Houghton reiterated his earlier request for information on how many computers have been replaced and how many remain. Mr. Anderson added that each employee should have either a desktop or a laptop, not both. Mr. Houghton emphasized the need for a clear annual computer-replacement plan. Other technology items reviewed included network switch upgrades, network and software updates, and a police server upgrade to support body-worn cameras.

Regarding online permitting, Mr. Roache stated that the project will not be ready for 2026 and may be more appropriate for 2027. Staff will wait until the end of budget discussions before making a recommendation.

A new police cruiser will be funded through the Detail Fund, though a long-term cruiser replacement program is still needed. Municipal Center improvements include Sewall Room bathroom upgrades and LED lighting. Binette Field improvements total \$23,000; with \$14,000 already available, only \$10,000 needs to be appropriated. Stevens Park continues to use previously allocated CIP funds.

Stratham Hill Park includes \$7,000 for various maintenance items, including picnic tables, barn roof work, and bathroom repairs. No funding is proposed for Fire Tower rehabilitation in 2026. Mr. Houghton reiterated that only items supported through a collaborative process should be included in the CIP.

Road reconstruction funding—partially supported by the State—was discussed, with consideration of reducing the 2026 allocation from \$350,000 to \$320,000.

Mr. Roache provided an update on PFAS remediation. Wilcox & Barton conduct groundwater testing, while Aquatects installs filtration systems. Current quotes range from \$175,000 to \$177,000. Additional money will be needed to cover expected monitoring and testing. All grant funding has been exhausted, and future costs will fall entirely on the Town.

On property revaluation, Mr. Roache reported that cyclical inspections were scheduled to begin in Fall 2025. We have a contract, but it was unclear if or how much of the work has been done. No invoice has been received yet. The Board discussed assessing services and will review the contract to determine the appropriate CIP allocation.

The Board discussed the Building and Maintenance Trust. Mr. Houghton advocated reducing the annual allocation, while Ms. Knab disagreed, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a reserve for emergencies. They reviewed anticipated repairs at the Police and Fire Stations buildings. Ms. Knab reiterated the need for a financial buffer, while Mr. Houghton felt most major needs had already been addressed and future requirements could be anticipated.

Mr. Roache reported that implementing a building access control system would cost approximately \$90,000 for the Municipal Center and \$25,000 for the Police Station, with the Fire Station bringing the total to an estimated \$150,000–\$200,000. Mr. Houghton asked Ms. Ruest to research expenditures from the trust over the past three years and report back. Ms. Knab questioned whether the Town has a policy outlining minimum balance requirements. Ms. Ruest noted that maintaining a defined threshold would be beneficial.

Mr. Anderson raised concerns about the Fire Department's request for two truck replacements in 2028, suggesting shifting one to 2029 and removing the ladder truck planned for 2031. It was noted that only Lindt would require a ladder truck, and Exeter would respond to that facility. He also questioned the DPW's scheduled truck replacements in 2027–2029, asking for clarification on what is being replaced and whether the timing is appropriate.

Mr. Houghton called for a workshop with Department Heads to collaboratively build the capital spreadsheet and ensure alignment. He hopes to begin the process earlier next year, ideally in the summer. The first BAC meeting is scheduled for January 8, and he emphasized the need for a final draft before that meeting. Ms. Knab noted a significant increase in capital needs from 2026 to 2027 and encouraged efforts to smooth the spike.

The Board discussed the transfer station redesign and which funding source should be used. They reviewed the intended purpose of each fund, and Mr. Houghton supported Ms. Ruest's suggestion of establishing thresholds for each account. The transfer station redesign is planned for 2026, with construction in 2027. Several projects are currently assigned to the Building and Maintenance Trust, and the Board questioned whether some should instead be funded through the CIP. Ms. Ruest agreed that decisions should be made case-by-case throughout the year based on established thresholds.

Ms. Knab noted that CIP items can be less visible to the public and suggested providing examples of what CIP funds support. She also expressed concern that relying too heavily on the Building and Maintenance Trust leads to losing track of its intended purpose.

Regarding the transfer station redesign, Mr. Anderson commented that the current layout is very inefficient, though he deferred to others with more expertise.

The Board reviewed the Fire Department budget. Mr. Houghton questioned whether defibrillator equipment should be funded through the EMS Ambulance Fund rather than the Capital Reserve Fund. Mr. Anderson expressed concern that the Fire Chief may be overestimating training stipends given current vacancies and unfilled shifts. He supported providing Fire/EMS staff with the standard COLA received by other Town employees and recommended adjusting pay to reflect differences between single- and dual-certified personnel. He also suggested maintaining a 3% increase for medics and aligning night-shift differentials with day-shift rates, noting that these adjustments would reduce the overall payroll request.

Ms. Knab asked whether it was problematic to budget for all shifts and positions when some are unfilled. Ms. Ruest explained that it is permissible, but if positions are filled unexpectedly, funds must be available elsewhere. She noted the same issue exists within DPW, where positions remain vacant despite being fully budgeted. Mr. Houghton felt maintaining the 2025 budget level would be acceptable, while Ms. Knab cautioned that filling positions later could create a significant payroll increase. Mr. Anderson believed the 2026 budget may be overestimated. The Board continued discussing DPW vacancies.

The group reviewed electricity and fuel costs and explored potential areas for reductions. Ms. Ruest walked through the revenue spreadsheet, emphasizing that revenues should never be overestimated.

The Board also discussed the Collector's Eye building and the potential work required to bring the units up to rental standards.

At 10:40pm Ms. Knab motioned to adjourn. Mr. Houghton seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Richard

Recording Secretary