

MINUTES OF THE FEBRUARY 3, 2025 SELECT BOARD MEETING

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

ALSO PRESENT: Town Administrator David Moore, Finance Administrator Christiane McAllister, Tedd Tramaloni, Budget Advisory Committee member

At 7:00 pm Mr. Houghton opened the meeting and asked for a motion on the draft minutes. Ms. Knab motioned to approve the minutes from January 6 and January 21, 2025, as amended. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton then opened the Public Hearing. Mr. Moore stated that this is the Public Hearing for the 2025 warrant and town budget. He reviewed the process, noting there were a couple of new items; an article regarding EMS special revenue fund and a petition article regarding Veteran's credit adjustment. He briefly reviewed the proposed articles.

Referring to his presentation, Mr. Moore explained the increases in the Operating Budget, specifically, the revaluation's impact, the school's budget and the discontinuance of Exeter ALS. The estimated tax rate is \$2.11 which is a .03 cent increase over last year or 1.13%. New expenses include the paramedic program and additional Fire Dept. staffing to increase coverage. Everything else decreases in the operating budget. Fortunately, our bond commitment ends which will help absorb the additional costs. Another change is to utilize our EMS Special Revenue Fund to take on certain special EMS operating costs.

Mr. Moore spoke about the worthwhile investment of tax dollars in Fire/EMS services. The Town makes up only 16% of the annual property tax bill; the rest is made up of county, local education and state education. With that 16% the services included are library, plowing, parks & recreation programs, sanitation, public safety (police and fire), general administration, etc. He reviewed how the tax rate is set.

Mr. Moore moved to Article 12, Capital Improvements, explaining that this refers to town buildings and infrastructure. For the past few years, we used American Rescue Plan funds for projects in this area.

Article 13 Capital Reserve Funds. This is a best practice tool that is akin to a savings accounts to meet the annual spend required to keep on top of replacements primarily for rolling stock but also building components that we schedule over time. All have stayed the same except the Fire Dept. Capital Reserve Funds.

Article 14 EMS Special Revenue Fund – No dollars are spent with this article. This article redefines the eligible expenses for the use of that fund. The proposed change allows us more flexibility. The proceeds will be used to fund ambulances and other expenses. This helps mitigate what would be a greater impact to the taxpayers to fund new investments in EMS.

Mr. Moore briefly reviewed Articles 15 Expending EMS Special Revenue Funds, Article 16 EMS training and supplies and Article 17 funding EMS Equipment.

Mr. Moore moved to the Citizen's Petition to raise the current veteran's credit (which is \$600) to \$750, which is the maximum. Approximately 350 veterans receive this credit currently.

Next, Mr. Moore discussed elderly exemptions, last adjusted in 2019. Thirty-eight households currently receive this benefit. Potential changes include increasing the income eligibility thresholds, increasing the asset limits or increasing the exemption levels. Closing the gap between married and single income thresholds was also discussed. They will review these exemptions annually.

Mr. Moore discussed Article 20, adopting new exemptions, such as Disabled, Blind and Deaf. If these are adopted, they won't significantly affect the town's finances but will be a big difference for those who qualify.

Article 21 Adoption of a Recreation Trust, based on accounting standards and auditor recommendations, donated funds for recreation programs should be in a Trust. We've been incorrectly putting them in our Special Revenue Fund.

Article 22 Stevens Park – This article would add funds to the funds set aside last year for improvements to Stevens Park, such as a pavilion, reconfigured parking and additional court space. It is anticipated that the project will move forward in phases.

Mr. Houghton opened the meeting to the public. Pat Abrami, Tall Pines Drive, asked for clarification on the Plaistow ALS Regional Service. The dissolution of the Exeter ALS is being replaced by what Plaistow is creating. The cost to participate the first year in that regional program is very low. We are a large community to not have paramedic capacity. The Plaistow service will serve to complement our services. Our goal is to have a paramedic on 7 days a week, but that will take time to build.

Mr. Anderson speculated on the number of calls involving paramedics. Lt. Chris Heal noted that many times paramedics are cancelled or not needed. Janice Murphy, RN, spoke in support of a paramedic service in town. Mr. Houghton emphasized that we've been proactive, and acted immediately. The Seacoast Chiefs have formed a tight alliance around this and are coordinating and collaborating to move this forward. We will continue to watch closely.

David Johnson, 31 Glengarry, asked if, other than the 38 elderly people, there was any other group that were affected by the large increase in the December taxes. Mr. Moore replied that there were others who saw an increase above the median. Mr. Wass was glad to see the Disabled Exemption and asked if it encompassed all disabilities? Mr. Moore qualification by virtue of the Social Security Act definition. A separate exemption for blind and deaf is not included here. Mr. Wass was supportive of adopting the disabled, blind and deaf exemptions and asked them to increase the exemption above the \$15,000. He asked if the Elderly and the Disabled be piggybacked on each other. Mr. Moore was unsure but would find out.

Mr. Abrami we're surrounded by towns that have paramedics and he feels we could rely on mutual aid. Mr. Houghton said the Seacoast Chiefs are working to evaluate options and provide the highest level of service and the most efficient means. Our Chief has been working tirelessly to engage with other Chiefs. We're working on it, it's not complete yet.

Wally Stevens, former Stratham resident, offered to assist with the signage at Stevens Park. The land was once his family's land. Mr. Houghton assured him they will integrate that into the Stevens Park plan.

Mr. Houghton asked for discussion. They discussed the order of the articles. Ms. Knab questioned if they were ready to make a change to the Recreation Expendable Trust. Ms. McAllister felt they were.

Mr. Anderson spoke to Article 12, the capital items to be completed this year. He sees no reason to carry the balances on the books for the next four years. He thinks they should change the date to lapse from 2030 to 2025.

Mr. Houghton asked if there was further comment from the public. Ms. Benvento asked if the Elderly Exemption would be voted on this evening. They explained that the Town Warrant will be posted prior to Town Meeting. Any changes will be reflective of this evening's discussion. A vote will be taken at Town Meeting.

Mr. Abrami asked about EMS revenues and if we could charge a higher rate for ambulance services to cover the increased cost of a paramedic service. Ms. McAllister said there will be additional billing when paramedic services are provided.

Mr. Houghton motioned to close the public hearing. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Anderson spoke to Article 12, saying the projects will be completed in 2025. There is no reason to lapse the appropriations and have the monies remain unused for five years. Ms. Knab wondered what would happen if we didn't complete the projects. Mr. Moore offered that they could use the money for other projects. Ms. McAllister said the customary way of managing the CIP is to have a projection for up to that 6th year to identify what we anticipate to spend. She referred to a newspaper article on a neighboring town where they were doing a two year period because it was a bigger project. The state gives a 5 year non-lapsing primarily to cover bigger projects. Here, we have been using it for smaller ongoing projects. There is no good reason to have it be a five year appropriation. Five year non-lapse is an accounting nightmare for her and the auditors. The Board determined they were not ready to move forward with a change at this point, but that it needed further investigation. Mr. Moore would like to come back after Town Meeting with a strategy to move to one year appropriations and fix the situation with an explanation that is prepared and put it all in the unassigned fund balance. He would like to be better prepared to present it to the community.

Mr. Moore went through the remaining Articles with no comments from the Board.

Regarding the Citizen's Petition for the Veterans Credit Adjustment, the Board doesn't make a recommendation but may speak on it.

Article 19: Elderly exemptions. Whitney Consulting recommended increasing the asset limits beyond \$250. The Board decided on \$275.

Disabled, Blind and Deaf exemptions. Mr. Anderson would like to answer Mr. Wass's question on if they were cumulative. Discussion ensued about the amount of the exemption. Ms. Knab asked about the guidelines for qualifications. What is the RSA? Mr. Moore said he will prepare the Warrant and make them consistent and brought into alignment with surrounding communities. They agreed to start conservatively and revisit in later years.

Next Mr. Moore reviewed the Stratham Recreation Expendable Trust. Ms. McAllister explained she would change the purpose from "adopt" to "establish" a trust with no money in it. Ms. McAllister explained that the trust would be a place to "deposit" gifts or donations from the residents for the purpose of recreation funds. Auditors have warned us that we cannot mix these funds in the Recreation Revolving Fund. The recommendation was to create an expendable trust to hold any gifts or donations and held by the Trustees of the Trust Funds. We must track any donation or gift along with what the donor's intention. The Select Board would be the body who would spend the funds based on the donor's intention. Ms. Knab recalled this was discussed as a way to mitigate what is happening with the sports boards that are forming non-profits. She questioned why a non-profit would want to go through this process when they could just take those funds in themselves and carry them as a non-profit. Mr. Moore said this will allow us to take the donation and use it for the specific purpose it was intended. This is a place to put it then the town can own the expenditure for the purpose. Ms. McAllister agreed, this gives us a way to put the financial resources where we want to spend them. Ms. McAllister explained the process. These are private funds. The State laws in Municipal budgeting say we cannot mix public with private monies. The Board was supportive.

Mr. Moore addressed Stevens Park, requesting direction on how to move forward. They discussed the funding. Ms. Knab supports it but said it's up to the Town to decide. Mr. Houghton would like more specificity regarding the plans but supports it.

Ms. McAllister asked them if they were comfortable taking \$1,150,000 from the fund balance. That is what you are doing with this budget. The group discussed. Ms. McAllister said there would be a couple more expenses coming in from 2024. This is a recap of where the budget landed after we set the tax rate. She reviewed the numbers. We would be slightly under what the auditors recommend. Mr. Anderson said that after they finalize the lapse policy, he wants the Board to have a written fund balance policy and clearly state when it should be used, how it should be used, how the reserve should be replenished, how quickly and what happens when the fund balance or reserves drop below the designated level. This is standard procedure and most Towns have this. The Board agreed. They decided to move forward with the budget as stated. They continued to discuss Stevens Park

Mr. Moore said he will produce a warrant for their signature. Because they were still unclear on a few of the articles they decided to meet on Monday at 3:30 to finalize. They will vote on the articles at the meeting on Monday.

Mr. Anderson felt the taxpayers have an inaccurate view of them, thinking they decide everything, but they don't. He'd like to see more explanation to the taxpayers on what their tax bill is made up of. Ms. Knab said the schools are part of our town and did not want to be in opposition to them. Mr. Anderson has seen erroneous information about the town on social media. Mr. Moore said this year the school is showing the cost impact of the bond. Mr. Moore said we could find out what they do have, bring it back and see if they want to put their name behind an estimated projection based on the assumptions. Mr. Moore said he will obtain that information for them by next Monday.

Mr. Moore regrets not having the noise ordinance ready. After quickly reviewing a draft of the ordinance, Mr. Houghton commented on the decibel levels. Mr. Moore will share the draft with the couple.

CORRESPONDENCE

Regarding the Turnberry correspondence, they noted the road is private. Chisholm, who they compared themselves to, is a public road. Mr. Moore will explain this to the Turnberry writers. Mr. Anderson said Mr. Swett had at one time attempted unsuccessfully to make private roads public. Mr. Houghton said that some private roads are not built to town standards so it would be problematic to have them change from private to public.

The Board asked for the status of TMAC and dogs at the park. The Board will wait to hear what TMAC decides at their meeting on Feb. 20. Other committees will be solicited for their input. They talked about the language in the deed to the park. Discussion ensued about non-residents speaking at Town Meeting. She has respect that they might show up and are passionate about the park but her obligation is to Stratham residents; they should have priority to speak. She would prefer people write a letter.

Mr. Houghton turned to the release of funds for capital projects at Stratham Hill Park. Mr. Moore noted these are already appropriated funds in the CIP and the funds are available in the SHP revolving account. The SHPA supports the projects. Mr. Houghton motioned to release SHP funds for use on the scale house, electrical building, restroom roof and carpentry repairs for dugouts. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor. Mr. Moore was hoping to get volunteers to do painting and work on the Binette Field storage building here at Municipal Center and dugout. Mr. Anderson motioned to release the Binette Field funds as outlined in the Feb 2 memo. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Moore updated them on the Town Report. The in memoriam and dedication will be discussed in a non-public.

Mr. Moore moved to the road naming policy. Ms. Knab wanted to be sure Fire and Police were part of the process. Mr. Anderson motioned to adopt the Stratham Road Naming Policy of Feb. 3 2025. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

ADMINISTRATION

Mr. Moore stated the HB 586 First Responder Assistance would be helpful to support. He will let the delegation know. He will get them a summary and make a recommendation. Ms. Knab said it has a fiscal note so it could be a tough year for it, but it is worth supporting.

Mr. Moore and the Board agreed that they do not support HB 86.

The group talked briefly about status of Board and Committee expirations and openings. Conservation Commission is in need of volunteers.

Seacoast online article sale of Aquarian by Eversource is notable. Mr. Moore will try to find out what it means for us. The new owner is Connecticut Power and Light.

RESERVATIONS

Ms. Knab motioned approval for Stratham Community Church to use the top of the hill at Stratham Hill Park on April 20 for their Easter sunrise service. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Anderson motioned approval for Stratham Memorial School road closure on May 16 at 1:15. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

At 9:30pm Mr. Houghton motioned enter nonpublic to discuss personnel matters. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. Roll call: Houghton-yes; Knab-yes; Anderson-yes

At 10:05pm Mr. Houghton motioned to come out of the non-public session and adjourn the meeting. Ms. Knab seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Richard
Recording Secretary