

## **MINUTES OF THE JANUARY 5, 2026 SELECT BOARD MEETING**

**MEMBERS PRESENT:** Board Members Chair Mike Houghton, Joe Anderson

**ABSENT:** Vice Chair Allison Knab

**ALSO PRESENT:** Town Administrator Tim Roache

At 6:58pm Mr. Houghton opened the meeting and motioned to approve the revised minutes of the December 15, 2025 Select Board meeting. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton noted that Police Chief Anthony King could not attend due to an injury and Steve Hamilton, Whitney Consulting, was not available to attend. The Board reviewed correspondence from Mr. Bacon regarding a parcel of land. Mr. Houghton recalled a similar inquiry several years ago that was denied due to potential impacts on the Town's future use of the property. It was unclear whether Town Counsel had been consulted at that time. Mr. Roache noted that the earlier request involved property off Gifford Farm Road, while the current inquiry concerns land off Lovell Road. He recommended additional staff research before responding, and the Board agreed. Mr. Houghton stated that the key question is whether a standing easement exists; beyond that, the matter would follow the Planning Board and standard land-use processes. Mr. Roache will prepare a draft response letter once the research is complete.

Mr. Houghton next addressed the email regarding e-bikes at Stratham Hill Park. Mr. Anderson recalled that in a previous meeting Chief King outlined the distinctions among the various types of e-bikes. Mr. Houghton observed that this and other unresolved issues tie back to the broader discussion held at the last meeting about developing a long-term vision for Stratham Hill Park. He emphasized the need to engage a wider group of stakeholders, establish a unified plan, and implement it thoughtfully. The Board agreed that the e-bike question will be incorporated into this larger conversation. As e-bikes continue to grow in popularity, the Board acknowledged that the topic has not yet been formally addressed at the park.

Moving to new business, the Board reviewed the 2026 Select Board meeting schedule and discussed when to invite the Legislative Delegation. Mr. Houghton asked Mr. Roache to coordinate with Ms. Knab, who serves as part of the delegation, to determine the most appropriate meeting date.

Mr. Houghton then introduced the proposal from Wilcox & Barton. Mr. Roache requested authorization to sign the agreement. Mr. Anderson questioned the value received for the cost, and Mr. Roache explained that the firm conducts required PFAS groundwater monitoring, including collection and sampling. Mr. Houghton added that they also handle reporting. He suggested inviting the firm to a future meeting to provide an overview of their services and offer a forecast of emerging issues based on recent trends. The Board noted that the PFAS testing area has expanded beyond the originally identified zones, and each expansion requires additional remediation work by another contractor. Mr. Roache reported that associated costs now range from approximately \$125,000 to \$175,000. He will invite Wilcox & Barton to attend a meeting after budget season, likely in late February or early March.

Mr. Houghton moved to authorize the Town Administrator to sign the 2026 Agreement. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Mr. Houghton moved to the Winnicutt subdivision road names and suggested moving it to the next meeting so that Ms. Knab could provide input.

Mr. Houghton requested an update on the ZBA rules and fee schedule. Mr. Roache reported that Ms. Price recommended reviewing the updated Planning Board fee schedule at the same time as the ZBA schedule. The Board agreed that both should be addressed through a public hearing.

Mr. Anderson stated that he had received an email from John Cushing inquiring whether the Board would be receptive to a funding request to incorporate USA 250 into Stratham's Summerfest program.

Mr. Roache provided an update on his management team meetings with Mr. Hickey and Ms. Ruest, noting ongoing work to revise the employee review process. He is proposing changes with which he has had previous success and aims to make the process more continuous. Mr. Houghton agreed, emphasizing that employee retention is supported by open, transparent engagement, with reviews focused on behaviors that reflect core values and on the skills required for each role. He shared that his company conducts quarterly one-on-one meetings to set goals and review accomplishments tied to strategic initiatives. Mr. Roache added that annual reviews alone can leave underperforming employees blindsided, underscoring the need for more frequent feedback. He, Mr. Hickey, and Ms. Ruest will continue refining the process and will bring a draft document to the Board for review.

The Board also discussed the Employee Manual. Mr. Anderson felt the prior draft was overly lengthy and repetitive and suggested looking to more streamlined models. He noted that six key issues had previously been identified by the former Town Administrator and Finance Administrator and recommended focusing on those areas first. Mr. Houghton suggested consulting NH Municipal Association for examples, recommendations, and best practices.

Mr. Roache provided an update on the new Town website, noting that Revize had not fully conveyed the amount of post-launch work required of staff. The Board agreed that the site looks good overall. He has spoken with the website committee about limiting editing access to ensure a consistent appearance across all pages. Mr. Anderson inquired about the status of the Select Board Newsletter. Mr. Roache will follow up with Ms. Richard for an update.

Mr. Roache reported that Ms. Fowle created a presentation template for departments to use when meeting with the Budget Advisory Committee (BAC). Mr. Houghton noted that the BAC has historically requested a line-item budget, which has been provided along with other materials in advance of the meeting.

Mr. Roache also highlighted the need to begin preparing the Town Report and asked the Board for suggestions on items to include in the Select Board's section, which he will draft.

Mr. Anderson asked whether RPC still planned to attend the upcoming Planning Board meeting. Mr. Roache confirmed that Jenn Rowden will attend to discuss impact fees, and Mr. Anderson indicated he plans to be present.

Mr. Anderson asked for an update on DPW openings. Mr. Roache reported that the Laborer and Facilities Lead positions are currently being finalized and will be posted soon. Mr. Anderson inquired whether the wage rates are competitive in the current market. The Board briefly discussed the responsibilities of the Facilities Lead role and the associated compensation.

The Board was informed that the auditors have been in contact with Ms. Ruest, who has reviewed their materials and discussed outstanding items with them. No significant issues were found.

#### RESERVATIONS

Mr. Anderson motioned to approve the New Life Baptist Church to continue to use the Sewall Room on Sundays at a reduced rate. Mr. Houghton suggested a slight increase. Mr. Anderson motioned for the fee to be at a rate of \$350 per quarter in exchange for sweeping/mopping following their meetings. Mr. Houghton seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

#### APPOINTMENTS

Mr. Houghton stated that Mike Lamb is being considered for Emergency Management Director and June Sawyer is being considered for Deputy Emergency Management Director. Mr. Anderson wondered if the previous Director would oversee Mr. Lamb for the first six months for an additional level of support. They would also like to see a few more assistants or deputies for succession planning.

#### OLD BUSINESS

Mr. Anderson motioned to approve the abatement for 132 Portsmouth Avenue, Stratham, in the amount of \$9,788 for the 2025 tax year. Mr. Houghton seconded the motion. All in favor. Mr. Roache reported that the Town has received the deed and keys to the Lane property. He noted that a pipe had burst in the Lane house, affecting the line that serves the other buildings. A restoration company is currently warming and drying the structure. The next steps include repairing the plumbing and replacing necessary fixtures. The Board briefly discussed the scope of work, and Mr. Roache encouraged them to visit the property to see the conditions firsthand. Mr. Roache shared that he had spoken with Nate Merrill, who referenced Drew Bedard's report recommending upgrades to the main house systems. Mr. Houghton felt that the immediate priority is to dry the building and maintain heat in the basement, after which restoration and system upgrades can proceed. Mr. Roache added that Mr. Merrill believed some modernization may be possible even with the property's historic designation.

Mr. Houghton inquired about the rental status. Mr. Roache explained that the lease had not been signed previously because the Town did not yet own the property. It has now been reviewed by Town Counsel and is ready for execution. He also noted receiving a rental inquiry for the tannery building for a business venture. Before considering any rental arrangements, the building must be evaluated to ensure it meets rental standards. Mr. Roache will move this process forward as quickly as possible.

Mr. Roache reported that he has submitted the budget to the Budget Advisory Committee (BAC). Mr. Anderson noted that projected 2026 revenues appear lower than actual 2025 revenues and requested clarification. Mr. Roache will follow up with the Finance Administrator for an explanation.

Mr. Houghton observed that the Board is not yet where it would like to be with the budget and looks forward to BAC recommendations. He emphasized the importance of maintaining consistency in the tax rate and asked the Finance Administrator to develop tax-rate projection models comparing anticipated rates to prior years. He noted that Ms. Ruest's December reports show the Town is currently below budget overall, contributing to fund balance. The Board will need to understand available fund balance while remaining within the auditor's recommended parameters, which Mr. Houghton recalled as no less than 5 percent. They agreed there appears to be no clear reason for revenues to be decreasing.

Mr. Houghton then moved to the Fire Department payroll. Mr. Anderson shared that he had spoken with the Fire Chief regarding payroll, training, and stipends, and that the Chief may be budgeting conservatively out of concern for exceeding appropriations. The Board supported the Chief's advocacy for his department and noted that the BAC will provide input, anticipating substantial discussion on these requests.

Mr. Houghton added that the BAC should also provide a recommendation regarding the fire tower. Mr. Roache commented that removing the fire tower from the budget significantly improves the overall picture, as it is a large-ticket item. Mr. Houghton stated that once the BAC completes its review and issues its recommendations, the Board will make the final decisions. Mr. Anderson asked to see the draft warrant.

Seeing no further business, at 8:12pm Mr. Houghton motioned to adjourn. Mr. Anderson seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Richard  
Recording Secretary