

## ANNUAL TOWN MEETING MINUTES

March 3, 2020

Moderator David Williams called the meeting to order at 9:08 a.m.

He mentioned that the Girl Scouts were selling cookies and the Historical Society was selling pie. He said the Historical Society is asking people to fill out a survey in person or online to provide input for their strategic planning process.

David Williams explained that according to Vermont statute, buttons, campaign paraphernalia, etc. with candidate or party names are not allowed at town meeting. He asked non-voters to occupy a specific section of the bleachers at the side of the room and asked voters not to sit in that section. He read the warning, noting a printing error in Article 3, which should have said “three (3)” instead of “one (3).”

### **Article 5. To review the reports of the town officers and others as included in the Town Annual Report.**

Eric Osgood asked for a moment of silence in memory of town constable and health officer Sharon Duffy who passed away this past year. He presented a town report to her partner, son, and mother. He gave a copy of the town report to Jan Perkins, who recently retired after serving for 20 years as assistant clerk. He gave another copy of the town report to Peg Rowe’s son, who accepted it on Peg’s behalf, as she was in Florida after having retired from doing cleaning and organizing at the library. The town report was dedicated to Jan and to Peg and had a page in memory of Sharon.

Eric encouraged anyone not signed up to sign up for Vermont Alert. It is a method the town is using to get emergency messages out. The town will be sending test messages twice a year on the weekends when time changes.

He also encouraged vulnerable members of the community to register for the Citizens Assistance Registry for Emergencies (CARE.) A confidential list is kept at dispatch centers. Only the fire chief and emergency management director have access. They can get the list when there is an emergency event. It is helpful for members of the community who might need special help in an emergency to sign up so emergency personnel are aware of issues.

Walter Pomroy asked if the new grand list that will come out this year will be certified and submitted to the state for taxes. Will that happen in time? Eric said yes.

### **Article 6. To establish the rates of compensation for the Town Officers.**

**Rick Aupperlee moved to establish a rate of compensation of \$1200 per year for the selectboard chair and \$1000 per year for all other selectboard members and the motion was seconded.**

Duncan Hastings said he thinks rates of compensation have been at that level for a number of years and he would be in favor of increasing them. He suggested \$1200 for regular board members and \$1500 for the chair would be more appropriate given the amount of work the board does in the year.

Rick asked if that suggestion is coming from the board or the floor. Dave Williams said as far as he knows it is coming from the floor. He doesn't think the board is advocating either way. Selectboard members agreed.

**Geoff Corey moved to amend the motion to make rates of compensation \$1500 per year for the chair and \$1200 per year for other members and the motion was seconded.**

Kim Dunkley said a lot of people in this room serve on boards and don't get paid a cent. There are a lot of people whose taxes have gone up. We need to take that into consideration.

**The motion to amend was passed by a standing vote.**

**The amended motion was passed by a standing vote.**

**Article 7. Shall the voters authorize total fund expenditures for operating expenses of \$3,047,961.25, of which \$1,859,934.91 shall be raised by taxes and \$1,016,612.37 by non-tax revenues?**

**Eric Osgood moved to authorize total fund expenditures for operating expenses of \$3,008,282.45, of which \$1,016,612.37 shall be raised by taxes and \$1,188,026.34 by non-tax revenues and the motion was seconded.**

Eric noted that the figures in the motion he made were a little different from what was printed on the warning. What is driving the change is a change made to the highway department capital equipment plan. The town pulls money out of the highway department capital equipment reserve fund. It is added to the budget as revenue and then spent for equipment purchases. We made a change to the chart of planned purchases. One tandem truck will be replaced in 2022 instead of in the next fiscal year because it is holding up well. A smaller dump truck used for salting is not doing as well. We were concerned it wouldn't make it until the planned replacement in 2022-23 so it will be replaced a year earlier. A year from now the board will propose a budget that includes purchase of both the large tandem truck and the smaller truck. Because we are not purchasing a truck this year there is a \$40K discrepancy between the printed budget figure and the figure in Eric's motion. The only equipment we propose to purchase in the coming fiscal year is a tractor. The board is also proposing to put \$100K into the highway capital equipment reserve fund. The main reason is that we are getting very close to running out of money in the fund and if we didn't add money it would probably go into the negative.

The amount we are asking for in property taxes is a very slight decrease from last year, about \$4500. For a \$100K property that would mean a reduction in municipal property tax of \$2.11. That does not affect the school tax. There is a town wide reappraisal going on this spring. That

will change people's assessed values, which will affect whether people see their taxes increase or decrease.

At the end of 2019 the town had \$54K in the buildings, grounds and equipment reserve fund. We have been spending a lot of money on the municipal building. The sides have been finished and we still have the tower to fix. The balance is down to about \$25K. The board is proposing to put \$16K into the buildings, grounds and equipment reserve fund and \$100K into the highway equipment reserve fund.

The tax anticipation reserve fund has about \$230K. This is what we use in the first quarter of the fiscal year. Many bills come in before we have property tax revenue or revenue from other sources and this fund maintains cash flow.

There is \$116,362 unassigned cash on hand available. The board applied some to reducing taxes. We don't know exactly how much cash on hand there is until the books are reconciled, which usually takes until mid August. Why don't we use cash on hand to reduce the tax rate and send out reduced tax bills? Because the tax rate gets set on July 1 and tax bills are sent out shortly afterward but we don't know the exact cash on hand number until mid August. So cash on hand rolls into this budget. We are estimating a balance for June 30 of the current fiscal year of a little over \$15K for a total of \$131K cash on hand to apply to reducing taxes. We are proposing to use \$15,374 to reduce taxes. Of the \$116K known cash on hand we had last August we are going to put \$100K in the capital equipment fund and \$16K in the buildings and grounds reserve fund. The amounts total \$131,735.

The town negotiated with the Historical Society regarding the Holcomb House. The note for Holcomb House has been paid off. There was a gap of about \$130K to make the town whole. We negotiated that the Historical Society will give the town \$75K, split over 2 years. There will be \$37,500 in this year's budget and the same amount in next year's and that will finish the Historical Society's commitment. The town recognized some in kind work they contributed, leaving a balance of about \$30K, feeling that was a pretty good investment - \$30K from the town for a \$300K property.

Eric walked through the whole budget, starting with revenues. The board is proposing to collect about \$500 less in property taxes than last year. On p. 23 the figure printed for revenue from the highway reserve fund was \$155,063. Because we are not making the tandem truck purchase the new figure is \$115,383.87. Miscellaneous revenue is \$37,900. That is where the \$37,500 from the Historical Society is coming in as revenue. Because of the changes, the total non-tax revenue figure changes to \$1,016,612.37. The estimated fund balance applied to reduce taxes is the approximately \$131K Eric just spoke about. The amount to be raised by taxes is unchanged. Total revenue is actually \$3,008,282.45. The change to the capital plan was not cascaded into the budget until after it went into print.

Eric reviewed expenses. Office admin. salaries is about \$10K short of what it should be. It is too late for the amount to be collected by taxes to be changed. The selectboard will have to figure out where money will come from to pay all the salaries. What happened was that last year the town approved a rec coordinator position. The salary for that position was shown on line 128 for one year. This year it was to be absorbed into regular office admin. salaries on line 125 but when

that was done we only captured about half of what was supposed to be allocated. He is sure the board can fill the hole at some point. It won't affect property taxes.

The amount printed for interest on loan payments is \$11,500, but the actual figure is \$8,032.10 due to us not making the purchase of the tandem truck this year. On p. 27, the small equipment purchase – current year line item feeds into the buildings and grounds reserve fund. Whatever is left over at the end of the year goes into that reserve fund. This is where we added the \$16K.

Public safety expense is about 26% of our budget. NEMS has a fairly significant increase, about \$16K. One of the main drivers is that they run on a calendar year budget and we run on a fiscal year budget. To make up the gap from January 1 to July 1 they are making a one-time compensation. Their calls were down significantly over the last year. They took on 5 additional towns in the Newport area. All the towns they serve share administrative cost and that resulted in a reduction in our share. That would have helped the budget go down, but they came in with a deficit this year due to lack of calls.

The lion's share of public safety expense is for patrol law enforcement. There is about a 3% increase for law enforcement. That is not a realistic representation of what true costs are. Sheriff Marcoux is putting in money from other areas. He has committed to doing that for 3 years, giving the 3 patrol towns (Johnson, Hyde Park and Wolcott) an opportunity to look at what we want for policing services. Nat Kinney is working on that and can provide more information.

Dispatch services are level funded. There is a 3% increase for the fire department. Sunday there was a major water leak in the Holcomb House due to an ice dam on the roof. The fire department cleaned off the ice and snow and the leak has stopped. Eric thanked the fire department.

Highway expenses are 43% of the budget. There is a 1.5% increase in highway salaries and about a 15% increase in insurance. On p. 33, line 391 as printed shows an expense of \$143K for purchase of large equipment. That was with the plan of purchasing a tandem truck. That line is now \$107,351.77. We are proposing to put \$100K in the capital equipment reserve fund.

The printed budget number is \$3,047,961. The new number is \$3,008,282.45. What is not reflected in the budget is any input on Scribner Bridge.

Duncan Hastings said the town spends a lot of time trying to estimate the amount of fund balance at the end of the year. It is a huge amount and it is a moving target. It can fluctuate quite a bit. Another approach would be to use an audited figure one year hence. That is a known number. Instead of using an estimated figure from this year the board could wait a year until there was an audited fund balance figure and then apply that known number to the budget. Budgeting would be easier and we would have better sense of what the number was.

**Duncan Hastings moved to amend the motion to replace “shall be” with “is estimated to be.”** We don't know at this point the actual number to be raised by taxes. It could be less than the amount in the budget. By using “shall be” we are committing to raise that amount of money. Using “is estimated to be” would allow flexibility to raise only the amount actually needed for taxes. **Eric and the seconder of his motion agreed to accept the amendment as a friendly amendment.**

Walter Pomroy agreed with Duncan's comment about the audited number. He is the treasurer of Lamoille County. That is what is done for the county budget and what the schools do.

Walter asked what the board thinks will need to be spent on Scribner Bridge.

Eric said it depends on which way we go. The covered bridge has a very narrow mouth in the Gihon. When there is high water it finds its way around the bridge and washes out the road and then goes back into the river. The water going around the bridge saves the bridge; the problem is that it costs about \$20K each time the road washes out. The selectboard has been hesitant to invest money into putting the road back way the way it was, knowing it will wash out again. The recent flooding incident has been declared a national disaster. FEMA will provide 80% reimbursement and there are some state matches. So it would cost the town less than \$20K out of pocket to repair the road. One option the board has looked at is putting in a low water crossing or swale to allow high water to flow through with minimal damage. That would cost about \$100K. There would be the same kind of match from FEMA. Through their mitigation program they are willing to spend extra money on that solution. If they approve that project the town share would be in the range of \$8-10K. Another option is removing the bridge. That would cost about \$100K. Mitigation would probably also pay 80% of that cost and there would be a state match. The board would like to explore the low water crossing option. In talking with FEMA they have been encouraging about that option. He is optimistic it could happen. About a month ago he provided testimony to the House and Senate Transportation Committee. He explained the situation we are dealing with concerning Rocky Road and Scribner Bridge. There wasn't a lot of interest until he mentioned it was a covered bridge. He thinks there might be some help from the state if we want to keep the bridge. If we want to put the road back as it was, that might cost about \$4-5K. If we did the swale option that might cost about \$10K.

Walter said both covered bridges need a lot of regular maintenance. We have gotten some one-time money from the Historical Society. We will get \$37,500 this year and will get that amount again next year. We have two covered bridges the community really cares about. Taking Historical Society money for a historical purpose seems like a no-brainer. He would like to earmark the Historical Society money for improvement and repair of the bridges, which could include things like removing graffiti.

**Walter Pomroy moved to amend the motion to increase proposed expenditures by \$37,500.** He knows he can't amend line items, but that is the exact number the Historical Society is giving the town. He hopes the board will take the recommendation that this be set aside for Scribner Bridge or both covered bridges and next year he hopes the same thing can be done.

David Williams said the amount Article 7 is warned for is what he considers to be the cap this meeting can vote to approve. His interpretation of the rules of town meeting is that once the selectboard takes a position on how much it wants to raise, the meeting can lower the amount but not move it above what the selectboard asked for, because the maximum hit people expect is what is warned. That has been his policy for a long time. But if the \$37,500 is added to the total budget number, it comes out \$2K under what the selectboard asked for in the first place, so he considers the motion to be in order.

**Jon Gregg seconded the motion to amend.**

David Williams said the motion just specifies a budget number. It cannot tell the board how to spend the money. The recommendation on spending is not binding but the board can be advised by the discussion.

Jon Gregg said he thinks Walter's suggestion is a good idea. He asked if the selectboard is willing to indicate whether they are willing to use that money for the bridge as suggested.

Eric said the board has not had an opportunity to meet and discuss this, but the board listens to the wishes of the voters and he thinks it is unlikely the board would not go with the wishes of the voters on this. He suspects the board would apply the money appropriately.

Eric Nuse said another benefit of the proposal to build a low water crossing is that it would benefit the quality of the water and fisheries. There may be Lake Champlain Basin funding for the project.

Duncan said he likes this idea as a member of the Historical Society. There are a number of grant programs out there, including the Structures Grant program, which can provide up to \$175K for projects like this. There are good funding sources such as water quality funding, as Eric Nuse suggested. The town has a bridge and culvert reserve fund that is intended for exactly this type of purpose. If the motion passes, he suggests that the board consider putting some of the \$37,500 into the bridge and culvert reserve fund where it can be used to leverage other funding.

Kyle Archer said he would like to have a set amount to be spent on the bridges rather than allocating \$37,500 to the selectboard with the friendly condition that it will be used for bridges. He doesn't know if the bridge work will cost that much. Maybe there could be a one-time contribution to the bridge and culvert reserve fund of \$15K or \$25K.

David Williams said this meeting cannot direct the selectboard to apply money in a particular way. The voters are giving them a lump of money and they are saying how they think they will spend it. All money may not go to exactly the line it was on in the proposed budget. If Kyle can figure out a proposed amendment that would get around that problem he is willing to hear it.

Shayne Spence asked if having this money would help the selectboard get FEMA matching funds. Brian Story said yes, it would. Having a demonstrated willingness on the part of the town helps open up funds. They pay us back for work we have already done. If we commit to willingness to do the work it does help. There are a lot of grants we could use this money as matching funds for. As Walter suggested, there is additional work that could be done beyond what we could get grant funding for. We won't be able to get a grant to remove graffiti.

Dave Williams said the motion is to amend the budget figure from \$3,008,282.45 to \$3,045,782.45. Steve Reber asked how the motion changes the other two numbers in the original motion. Walter said it should change the tax number by \$37,500. David Williams said it would change the amount to be raised by taxes from \$1,859,934,91 to \$1,897,434,91. The amount from non-tax revenues is still \$1,016,612.37.

**The motion to amend passed by a voice vote.****The amended motion passed by a voice vote.**

**Article 8. Shall the Town of Johnson vote to raise, appropriate and expend the sum of \$2,224.48 for the support of THE LAMOILLE COUNTY SPECIAL INVESTIGATION UNIT to provide services to residents of the Town?**

**Dick Cross moved the article as written and Eric Nuse seconded.**

Carol Borst said every county in the state has a special investigation unit. Her concern is the elderly. She collected signatures for a petition to get this article on the warning. A lot of abuse happens to elders. We need to protect them. Johnson and Waterville are the only towns in Lamoille County that haven't been contributing to this program. She thinks it is important to protect vulnerable people.

Nat Kinney said the special investigation unit in this county does a lot of work to investigate crimes against elders and more often against children. They investigate alleged sexual or physical abuse. In 2019 they investigated 13 cases of alleged sexual or physical abuse against minors in Johnson. Five of them resulted in felony arrests. He thinks the unit is very effective in investigating abuse against our most vulnerable people.

Walter Pomroy said he is confused. On p. 81 he sees a \$20K line item for the special investigation unit. He is trying to figure out how these tie together. How was the allocation arrived at? We are already making contributions to organizations like the Vermont Council on Aging. Are we duplicating services? When was the last time we looked at charitable contributions? When was the last time we removed one? He thinks if we pass Article 14 the first thing the budget advisory committee may do will be look at these line items. He suggests pausing on these items and the new budget committee can evaluate them.

Nat said the line item on p. 81 is in the sheriff's budget. In our budget money for the sheriff's department is a public safety expense. A detective works with the special investigation unit so some of what we budget to the sheriff's department goes to that line item in the sheriff's budget. There is a list of organizations that the community gives to. What happens is that the organizations gather signatures and bring a petition to the selectboard asking to be included in the town meeting warning. We always say yes if they get signatures. That is how this came to us, through the petition process. All the causes are fabulous. But they all tend to have other funding sources, from the state or grants, and our primary way of raising money is through taxes. He sees most of these things ideally as the responsibility of state or federal governments but that is a philosophical comment. The Vermont Council on Aging does not do investigations of abuse. That is a law enforcement function. It is true that money is going to the special investigation unit from the budget already but the fact remains that the special investigation unit has done a lot of work to protect elders and minors in this community.

Jackie Stanton said she is confused. Is this part of the Lamoille County Sheriff's Department or separate? Why is it not rolled into the law enforcement number? Nat said a special investigation unit has been set up in every county by the state. Initially it was funded heavily by the state and

over time state funding has tapered. It is not part of the Lamoille County Sheriff's Department but it works in combination with the sheriff's department to investigate crimes against vulnerable people. They have a facility where victims can be brought into a place that more like a living room in a home. They can bring a child in with a detective in plain clothes, sit down with toys and recording devices and the child can be questioned about what happened. They do really extraordinary work. Funding is complicated. Given the nature of the work they do he doesn't think we can really err on the side of being too generous. He would vote for this article.

Jackie asked, is this a separate nonprofit? Nat said yes. Jackie asked who receives this money. Nat said he doesn't know the answer. Carol Borst said the state gives every town's special investigation unit a certain amount of money and the director has to go out and get the rest. They petition towns for money and apply for grants. If we don't want to give them \$2200, we can give them \$2000. They need funding so they can do their work and not constantly be looking for money.

Walter said he is hearing a lot of unknowns in terms of who runs this program and how it is run. No one has vetted this number. He doesn't agree or disagree about giving the program money. He is just not ready to give when he doesn't know what we are giving it for or how it is allocated. The program needs to do a better job of informing the community what the money is allocated for. They can come back next year. He hasn't even heard the nonprofit's name so he can look up information on it. He urges people to vote no because we are uninformed. Let's say no and they can come back next year or the new budget committee can do the vetting process. Until he knows why we are spending this money he thinks we should not spend it.

Eric Hutchins read information from the website of the Lamoille County Child Advocacy Center and Lamoille County Special Investigation Unit: "Our center enhances our ability to provide a safe, accommodating and child friendly space for victims and their families. . . . Child Advocacy Centers thrive to provide a neutral, non-law enforcement, non-threatening setting for families to feel comfortable to come to and address their concerns. We received recognition and status as an Associate Member with the National Children's Alliance. With this membership, our center is held to a high set of standards. As members, we will be working towards full accreditation over the next 5 years. . . . The goal of the operation of the Child Advocacy Center/LCSIU is to promote cooperative efforts between municipalities, police agencies, prosecutor's office, the medical community, child protection services, and victim advocacy groups. LCSIU will strive to conduct quality investigations that result in prosecution, reduce stress and trauma to the victim, and protect the victim and community."

Shayne Spence said it is unfortunate that we don't have as much information as necessary for some to make up their minds. He wishes there was more but part of the reason is the nature of the crimes. There are a lot of very horrible stories of children being abused and human trafficking. He suggested a friendly amendment changing the appropriation to \$1500 so we can still contribute something but we can have more time to understand what the money is going to and how it is being spent by the SIU. **Dick Cross and Eric Nuse agreed to accept the friendly amendment and change the amount in the motion to \$1500.**

Rhoda Vis said she doesn't know a lot about the program, but she has learned in college how over-stressed state programs that investigate these crimes are. She is raising 3 children who have

come out of abuse. They would have been taken out of their home sooner if this program had been available. She thinks we can afford the money to help the program.

A voter said she worked for the Clarina Howard Nichols Center. They used the SIU to help victims in need. She wants to stress how vital it is to have this resource in our community.

Another voter asked, is it correct that the special investigation unit is getting \$20K already?

Nat said yes and no. On p. 81 there is a breakdown of the Lamoille County Sheriff's Department budget. We contract with them, along with Hyde Park and Wolcott, for patrol coverage and a detective position. At the bottom of the LCSD budget breakdown we see that the total budget is \$1.2 million. Of that, Johnson pays 40% because we have 40% of the population of the 3 towns. LCSD is giving \$20K of the money we are giving them to the special investigation unit. So 40% of that amount is in our town budget. Line 239 on p. 28 shows our share of the sheriff's department patrol budget.

David Williams said if this discussion is not concluded in 5 minutes he will suspend consideration of the article to hear from legislators, as all 3 are here. Nat said that is fortuitous timing. This is a program that was set up and funded by the state and their funding is getting squeezed so it is falling onto the shoulders of taxpayers. He told the legislators that any help they can give to the special investigation units would be good.

David Williams asked for unanimous consent to allow non-resident Chris Tetreault of the Lamoille County Sheriff's Department to speak. There were no objections.

Chris Tetreault said if anyone has questions about the \$20K line item the sheriff will be here in a few minutes and can answer questions.

David Williams suspended discussion on the article until after hearing from legislators.

Rep. Matt Hill, Rep. Dan Noyes, and Sen. Rich Westman addressed the voters.

Sen. Westman said he is encouraged by the fact that the governor put \$11 million in the capital bill for the rail trail. That is enough to finish it in the next 4 years. The House institutions committee is having a little angst over that going in as bonded money but there is solid support in the Senate. He is hopeful we will get money to carry the rail trail to completion. One of the things really putting a cloud over every discussion in the appropriations committee is underfunding of the retirement systems for teachers and state employees. That underfunding is most significant for teachers. Their retirement system is only funded at 54% of what it should be. The state employees' system is funded at about 70% of what it should be. We are short by about \$2.3 billion, which is a large number. We made a promise to teachers and state employees and we have to meet our responsibility but it is putting pressure on other things in the state budget.

Rep. Hill said he and Rep. Noyes both signed a letter of support for rail trail funding drafted by another legislator. Proposed funding comes from bonded dollars and it costs to pay the money back. There is discussion in the House now about how much funding comes from bonded dollars but he thinks overall the House is supportive. This year he was asked to fill a vacant spot on the

natural resources committee. That committee is dealing with an Act 250 bill. He worked hard to get designated village centers exempt from Act 250 review so towns can redevelop old buildings that are spewing carbon, which benefits everyone. Over the past few years he has been very involved in workforce development issues. He is not on a committee dealing with those issues now but he is still passionate about them. He is still trying to get state colleges more funding so they can be sustainable for the future. He is happy the rail trail is getting attention.

Rep. Noyes said he agrees about the rail trail and Northern Vermont University. He is on the human services committee. They are working on an act about providing services to older Vermonters and partnering with agencies providing those services. They are looking at creating an Office of Child Advocate, transition to adulthood of youth in state custody, home visiting programs, and rental properties for recovery housing.

Walter Pomroy said he has come to the conclusion that Act 46 is a mistake. It is stealing local control and not doing what it was intended to do. He feels the legislature needs to reexamine Act 46 and repeal it. He also thinks the legislature needs to reexamine the excess spending threshold and put some teeth into it.

Walter said he feels the governor will probably veto the Global Warming Solutions Act. While he is totally for the concept the bill promotes he feels it is destroying our democracy by turning over our government to a superclass of bureaucrats and lawyers. He hopes Sen. Westman votes no and when the governor vetoes it he hopes legislators all support the veto. There are good things in the bill that he is in favor of, but he doesn't want to destroy democracy to get there.

Kyle Archer said he comes from Colorado and he saw the legalization of marijuana there. He would like to know what it will look like in Vermont as far as what is being put in place and earmarks for money. He also would like to know where our community is as far as providing internet.

Rep. Noyes said last year the legislature created legislation that creates communications union districts. Towns can band together and work to run fiber out to the last mile. Some towns are looking at getting together and partnering with a company that can run fiber instead of waiting for it to be run by an outside company.

Sen. Westman said it has long been thought that because power companies own poles and lines fiber would be better placed with them but state law didn't allow them to spend any money made off electric power on anything to do with fiber. Vermont Electric Coop is applying for a state grant to study the issue to see if it is feasible to carry fiber to people with the lines they have. If VEC could put together a plan that worked he thinks that would put a lot of pressure on the Public Service Board to take seriously the idea of utility companies that have infrastructure providing internet service.

Rep. Hill said regarding cannabis legislation, legislators have looked heavily to other states' regulation processes. They want to limit advertising. There is disagreement between committees about whether cannabis is an agricultural product. He thinks good regulations are being proposed. Legislators are learning from issues in other states.

Sen. Westman said we legalized marijuana without a regulated market. He feels we should have legalized with a regulated market. He is hopeful with the House finally passing a bill dealing with regulation. The Senate has voted for bills in past years that would have created a regulated market. There is a class funded by the health department at People's Academy serving 20-30 mostly at-risk kids. Every year he has been in the Senate the kids in that class have all said they have tried weed. Invariably they all say they buy on the black market and their black market dealer has suggested trying pills instead. They say they know they have had weed that was tainted with something else. They say they can text someone and get marijuana to the edge of the school grounds within 10 minutes. He wants to disincentivize the black market. He thinks it is time for a regulated market to make sure kids are buying something safe and not having something else pushed at them.

Rep. Noyes said the bill that just left the House has tax revenue going to education programs and afterschool programs.

A voter said she thinks it is important to provide some way to regulate it just like alcohol. It is an impairing substance. Her concern is public safety and impaired driving. With a regulated market there is money that could go to remediation or regulation. She knows it is harder to measure impairment with cannabis. She thinks we need to develop funding to give us resources.

Jessica Bickford, coordinator of Healthy Lamoille Valley said her students are really concerned that we are creating legal markets. Students on the Lamoille Area Youth Council pointed out that just by having a storefront you are advertising. She thanks legislators for not increasing outside advertising. We need to take advantage of opportunities for education in the time before markets are rolled out. There is an opportunity coming up for parents and kids to come together to hear a speaker from Colorado discuss cannabis risks. It is bad for youth because their brains are still developing. She encourages anything the legislature can do for education before markets are in effect.

The legislators left and discussion of Article 8 was resumed.

By unanimous consent, Sheriff Roger Marcoux was allowed to address the meeting.

Sheriff Marcoux said as he understands the issue there is an article for the special investigation unit that started out at \$2K and in the patrol budget there is a line for \$20K. The SIU program is an independent program that started several years ago after a young girl was killed in Orange County. Investigators in every county investigate sexual assault, particularly on children. In Lamoille County there is collaboration with the sheriff's department. The SIU has expanded into a children's advocacy group. The \$20K line item is revenue the sheriff's department, Stowe Police and Morristown Police have found through grants. That is credited toward the SIU's overall budget, so it is that much less the community will pay for. It doesn't cover the cost of investigations. The \$20K does not lead to an increase in taxes as the money was found through grants. As far as what the SIU does with the \$2K, he suggests getting someone from the SIU to explain exactly what the money is for. There are training and operating costs the state does not pay. The state does not fully fund the SIU. The legislature expects local communities to put up a share of the money.

Eric Hutchins said this morning we heard a ballpark estimate on our cost for Scribner Bridge of \$4-5K and we voted to put \$37,500 in the budget without an idea of what it will be used for. Now we are quibbling over \$700 to reduce stress for kids suffering from abuse. How do we amend the motion to go back to the original number?

David Williams said he will treat that as a motion to amend. The motion was seconded.

Dick Cross said he has nothing against the original amount. His only concern is that once we contribute money to an organization it seems like it is locked into concrete. He only moved to go to \$1500 because maybe next year we will know more. No one has said how critical the money is at this time. If it is critical he has nothing against the original amount of money.

**The motion to amend the amount from \$1500 to \$2,224.48 was passed by a voice vote.**

Arthur Hooper spoke about people breaking into homes. He said he has talked to the sheriff and deputies about it.

**The original motion was passed by a voice vote.**

**Article 9. Shall the Town of Johnson vote to raise, appropriate and expend the sum of \$2,000 for the support of Lamoille Family Center and Healthy Lamoille Valley (a program of the Lamoille Family Center) to continue to provide the residents of Johnson and the Lamoille Valley with parent and child services?**

**The article was moved and seconded as written.**

Jessica Bickford, coordinator of Healthy Lamoille Valley, said Healthy Lamoille Valley is a substance coalition program under the Lamoille Family Center. The money requested is not all new money. The Family Center had been getting \$1,410. This \$590 increase is being requested for several reasons. There have been funding cuts and the Lamoille Family Center took on Healthy Lamoille Valley, a coalition that has been doing work in the region for about 20 years and has never asked for town allocations. There has been steady funding through the Vermont Department of Health but those grants are ending. They are working on diversifying funding and asking communities for consideration. They just got a federal Drug-Free Communities grant but it requires a match. The additional \$590 will go towards that. Money for the match will also come from in-kind contributions and other sources. The Lamoille Family Center has a report in the town report on p. 107. Healthy Lamoille Valley works with 6<sup>th</sup> graders preparing for middle school transition. They are often worried about substance misuse and overestimate the percentage of middle school students that misuse substances. Healthy Lamoille Valley just provided some stands for the skate park. They will have more opportunities for youth to engage in prevention over the next year. The Family Center made 4000 home visits in the region this year. They have two playgroups in the town that meet on a weekly basis during the school year.

David Williams asked for clarification. Is the amount requested really \$590? Jessica said no. Because the Family Center asked for an increase, the allocation was removed from the town budget. In the past the town has given \$1,410. They are asking to increase that by \$590 for a total of \$2000.

Eric said the practice the selectboard has had in place is that when a nonprofit initially wants to come before the town for funds the board requires the group to raise a petition. If the voters agree they want to support the group then in succeeding years the appropriation is just included in the budget; there is not a separate article every year. If a group is looking for an increase they can ask the selectboard and the selectboard can put an increased allocation in the budget or the board can ask the group to get a petition for an article with the new number. In that case, we take the allocation out of the proposed budget so the group is not getting the old number plus the new number. That is why we are not showing an allocation for the Family Center in the proposed budget. The board is making them go through the process of asking the voters for an increase.

**The motion was passed by a voice vote.**

The meeting was recessed for lunch from 11:58 to 1:18.

**Article 10. Shall the Town vote to collect property taxes to the Town Treasurer in four equal installments (32 V.S.A. § 4792), as listed below; with delinquent taxes and assessments have charged against them an eight percent (8%) commission after the fourth installment (32 V.S.A. § 1674) and interest charges of one percent (1%) per month or fraction thereof, for the first three months; and thereafter one and one half percent (1 ½%) per month or fraction thereof from the due date of such tax? Such interest shall be imposed on a fraction of a month as if it were an entire month (32 V.S.A. § 5136). Payments are due in the hands of the Treasurer by 4:00 p.m. on the below due dates.**

**First installment to be paid on or before Monday, August 10, 2020.**

**Second installment to be paid on or before Tuesday, November 10, 2020.**

**Third installment to be paid on or before Wednesday, February 10, 2021.**

**Fourth installment to be paid on or before Monday, May 10, 2021.**

**The article was moved and seconded as printed and passed by a voice vote.**

**Article 11. Shall the town establish a reserve fund to be called the “TNL Reserve Fund” for the purpose of funding the operation of the Tuesday Night Live Concert Series to be funded by funds raised by donation and fee by the TNL Committee in accordance with 24 V.S.A. § 2804?**

**Howard Romero moved the article as printed and the motion was seconded.**

Eric Osgood said one reason for this reserve fund is to help us with accounting. Tuesday Night Live starts the first Tuesday in July. The Tuesday Night Live Committee collects most of its funds in spring. That comes into the town as revenue but the town’s budget year ends June 30, so the committee collects money in one fiscal year and spends it the next year. With the reserve fund, money will come in and be put into the reserve fund and then they can pull it out in the new fiscal year after July 1.

Howard reminded voters that Tuesday Night Live is completely self-funded. No taxpayer money is involved.

**The motion was passed by a voice vote.**

**Article 12. Shall the Town of Johnson make the following statement of support:**

**We, the citizens of Johnson, strongly support the completion of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail. We urge the Governor and Legislature to jointly develop a plan that will ensure the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail is completed by 2025.**

**Scott Meyer moved the article as printed and the motion was seconded.**

Eric Osgood said this article came into us as a resolution that was recommended for all communities along the rail trail. We have heard from legislators that rail trail funding has a good chance of going through. The impact to Johnson would be significant. We would benefit from traffic on the rail trail. The selectboard agreed to put in this article for community support and will send the resolution if the voters desire.

**The motion was passed by a voice vote.**

**Article 13. Shall the voters of Johnson affirm their support of Jenna's Promise in its mission to help those suffering from substance use disorder?**

**Jessica Bickford moved the article as printed and the motion was seconded.**

Eric Osgood said some have wondered why this article is before the town. How does it relate to the town? One reason the town decided to put this article in is that the project Jenna's Promise has underway is going to change the face of the community. They acquired the old church and are fixing it up. They acquired the Barrows Building and are hoping to fix it up and have a new café, which would benefit the community. For a lot of the grant writing they are doing they need sponsorship of a municipality. The town applies for grant money for them and the money comes through the town. The town will have administrative work in handling the grant money. The selectboard has heard from some people that "We don't want those people in Johnson." Those people are already here and they are us. This is a national, state and community problem a lot of people are facing and it has some bad results. The selectboard has invited the Tatro's here to explain the project.

Greg Tatro said he and his wife are the founders of Jenna's Promise. It has been not quite a year since it got off the ground. One thing they noticed when their daughter was suffering from substance use disorder was that she would get home after being an inpatient and she would relapse almost every time. Jenna's Promise has a mission of providing a safe place to go after coming off of inpatient treatment. That is lacking in the state. Chances of relapse are greater if people have no safe place to go. With the coffee shop, the plan is to have sober living upstairs and a place for people in recovery to work in the coffee shop downstairs. He thinks the town wants a coffee shop and the shop integrates people in recovery with the public. People will start

to realize that once people are in recovery they are no different from anyone else. They just need a little assistance. Jenna's Promise has applied for a sizable grant. The goal is to bring the Barrows Building back to the structure it was many years ago. They will totally renovate it and get it so it holds heat better, keeping costs down and being more environmentally friendly. The former church, Jenna's House, will be a place where people can have meetings. Barry Cohen is working on a USDA grant that will bring in audio and visual. There will be a big screen. We can have a kids' movie night. There will be music and sober parties there. It will be a sober building, with no drugs or alcohol in it. In winter there could be music for people in recovery and they can feel safe there. Usually places to listen to music have alcohol around. Families should feel safe coming there. Jenna's Promise has already started a financial assistance program for people coming out of treatment. So far they are financially sponsoring 12 people to get into sober living. He believes at least 8 are back in the community, working and being able to take care of themselves. There is now a state fund called Jenna's Fund. They will take this program over in a few months. They will have \$110K to help these people. The biggest thing Greg wants people to know is that once people are in recovery they are no different from the rest of us. He appreciates all the town support Jenna's Promise has garnered over the past year. The support has been incredible.

A voter asked if Jenna's Promise has collaborated with other programs that are similar. There is not a lot of money and there are a lot of nonprofits. Have they found a way to collaborate rather than compete?

Greg said they are working with North Central Vermont Recovery Center and Barry has been attending meetings with Lamoille County nonprofits. They are working with Lamoille Housing Partnership and not applying for things LHP wants to apply to. Their funding is different from most nonprofits. They are getting donations from people. John Casella sent a substantial amount. He doesn't think they will compete too much. They are working with local communities.

Sue Lovering thanked Greg. She said she thinks what Jenna's Promise is doing is wonderful. There was a round of applause.

**The motion was passed by a voice vote.**

**Article 14. Shall the Selectboard appoint and establish rules and procedures of a Budget Advisory Committee of resident taxpayers of the Town of Johnson, whose general purpose would be initial review, evaluation and recommendation to the Johnson Selectboard (who retain final budget decisions) of budget requests or proposals of such committees, boards, organizations and entities connected with the Town of Johnson budget, as defined by the Selectboard?**

**Walter Pomroy moved the article as printed with one change: replacing "resident taxpayers of the Town of Johnson" with "residents of the Town of Johnson." The motion was seconded.**

Walter said limiting committee membership to taxpayers would limit it to landowners. That may be illegal. Renters or people in living in a household but not paying taxes would not be able to be on the committee. Seniors with living trusts would not be able to be on the committee because

the living trust, not the person, is the taxpayer. A large segment of the population would be excluded. As originally worded, the article is saying only elite taxpayers can be on the committee.

Walter said Cambridge has a similar committee. He talked to a committee member. Cambridge and Johnson are a little different. Cambridge has its own fire department and ambulance company and we contract those out. But the Cambridge budget committee member feels the committee does a service to the community. They have been given some authority. They are allowed to “kick the tires.” This committee will only work if the selectboard gives it some power. If it is some of the same 50 people who are already on committees, that is not accomplishing anything. The committee needs authority and new blood.

Eric said some residents had requested that we have a budget committee. The selectboard didn't take a strong position for or against the idea. They could have required residents to draw up a petition but decided to put this in as a non-binding article and bring it up for discussion among the voters. Do voters think there is interest and willingness to serve and value?

Jackie Stanton asked Walter what kind of authority he is looking for.

Walter said the Cambridge finance committee sat with the library board, challenged their numbers and changed the budget they were going to present. They had the authority to challenge them. They voted on a list of recommendations they submitted to the selectboard. They were given authority to sit across from their fellow citizens and ask them to prove why they needed money and tell how they were going to use it. Other committees knew that if they were going to get approval from the budget committee they would need to work together with the budget committee. Before their proposed budgets went to the selectboard there was already a meeting of minds on what their budgets should be.

Steve Reber said he finds the idea interesting but he is not quite convinced. How would such a group be selected? Members might be self-selected. They would be people who were not voted for as selectboard members are. He could see the logic of this committee if we were seeing some shortcoming in how the selectboard is preparing the budget. Is the selectboard feeling budget preparation is too onerous? Is there some perceived notion that this committee is needed to get the job done properly?

Eric Osgood said how members are appointed would have to be worked out by the selectboard. It is hard for him to say that we need the committee. He doesn't really see where we do need it. He doesn't think we have had gaps but that is not to say there couldn't be a benefit. He doesn't have a strong opinion one way or the other.

Mike Dunham said this was his idea. He brought it up last summer to the board. He had had some interaction with people from Jeffersonville who had a similar committee in their town. They found it helpful. It put extra eyes from the community on the budget. The Johnson selectboard thought there was some merit at first and then the next time it was discussed it went south. Later, Duncan Hastings seemed to think it was a good idea. He was going to have a petition to put it on the warning but the board decided to go with it on their own. The second time the board discussed the idea it came up that board members thought they would lose some

control over the budget. He thinks the board would have the same control. He wanted to bring more people in the community into the budget process so they could take ownership and see how it is done.

Charles Gallanter asked, are we talking about the amendment or the main motion? David Williams said there was no amendment. In making his motion, Walter was not bound by the wording in the warning. As long as a motion relates to the topic of the warning it is in order. The original motion Walter made changed the wording from what was in the warning. The warning notice is not a motion. It is just giving notice of the topic.

**Charles moved to amend the motion to go back to “resident taxpayers” rather than “residents.” The motion was seconded.** Charles said it is important when considering fiscal issues to have people making decisions who have skin in the game. If the committee is open to all residents it includes people who have no skin in the game, particularly students. For the most part students are not taxpayers in Johnson and they should not be part of decisions on where our tax dollars go.

Mike said initially he had those same thoughts but he talked to some people and changed his position. He agrees with Walter. He thinks it is a good idea to have all kinds of people involved in the process. If we limit it to taxpayers there could be someone with a PhD in economics who was renting but intended to buy a piece of property who could not be on the committee. He would hate to cut a person of that caliber out of our discussion.

Jessica Bickford said her family has lived in town for 13 years. They lived on campus for 7 or 8 years and then bought a house. She has found that the students who want to be involved are really conscientious and bring a valuable voice to our community.

Shayne Spence said as a renter and one of the few people in the room below 30 he thinks it would be unfortunate to pass something that would make it impossible for him or any of his peers to serve on a committee.

Nat Kinney said he would be surprised if language restricting membership to resident taxpayers would even be legal. This is an advisory non-binding motion. He is pleased to listen to the will of the voters but he would not be able to support restricting membership only to resident taxpayers. That would be going back in history 200 years.

Doug said the proposed amendment reminds him of poll taxes, a device to reduce voter participation by people of lower income. He is strongly in favor of allowing all residents on the committee. He thinks the selectboard would select people who would contribute to the discussion. He thinks it would be a mistake to choose people based on economics rather than on what they have to contribute.

Jon Gregg said it seems strange that the selectboard would select people to serve on what seems like a watchdog committee. Eric Osgood said there really isn't another mechanism. Committee members would not be elected. He is not sure who would select them if not the selectboard.

Doug said he voted against this to start out with when it came before the selectboard because the selectboard is elected for budgetary purposes. We are loaded with tasks. Our budgets are getting tighter and tighter. We are having less surplus. But he didn't think we should let go of the responsibility and authority to make decisions. He thinks the first job that would be delegated to the committee would be to find out what the budgets of nonprofits are, what they do for us and how important our money is to them. We would want to be careful how we defined our questions for the committee so they would not feel the selectboard was ignoring them and the selectboard would not let go of our responsibility to voters to take care of the budget.

Jessica Bickford said she is wondering if this something that could be tried as a one year trial. We could set it up and see if it is of service or creates more work for the selectboard.

David Williams said whatever the body decides to adopt it is within the selectboard's discretion to explore structures. Or the selectboard wouldn't have to do anything. The board can pick up the recommendation or not.

Carl Powden said he has an uneasy feeling about this proposal. He could see it attracting people who have axes to grind and do not necessarily take the big picture view we expect of the selectboard. He thinks for that reason he will be voting no.

**The motion to amend failed by a voice vote.**

Eric Hutchins said if this is an unelected committee, that is a big deal, particularly if we want to give them authority. He is leery of taking democracy away from the elected selectboard. Selectboard candidates are all running unopposed. It seems unlikely that we would get new blood into a committee to do what is basically the selectboard's job. People can give input at selectboard meetings. This seems like an unnecessary step. We might get people with an axe to grind. He thinks the selectboard does a good job. This seems unnecessary.

Kyle Nuse said she agrees that we have to be very cautious with this. All selectboard meetings are open to the public. People are welcome any time to give input. Perhaps the board needs to do a better job of advertising meetings. This is what the board is elected to do. She thinks we do a good job. We are open to public input at regular board meetings, twice a month.

Al Beard said he agrees with Eric Hutchins. We are talking about duplication of services. He thinks the selectboard has done a fantastic job on budgets over many years. He sees no reason to have more confusion.

Jon Gregg said he is getting confused about the purpose of the committee. If the selectboard would like to have a group of volunteers to assign tasks to like reviewing nonprofits and they will be under the authority of the selectboard, that is one thing. If they have authority to object to the budget, that is something else. Would the selectboard like a committee of volunteers they can give work to?

Eric Osgood said he thinks the board does a good job of going through the whole budget. The board has not had the opportunity to come up with rules on how they would set up the

committee. If voters were very much in favor they would make up rules. Probably they would not give the committee too much authority.

Jon said it is unclear what this is. Is it a group of assistants for the selectboard or a group of people second guessing the selectboard?

Eric Osgood said this article is asking the board to come up with a committee. The rules and limitations and what the board would direct them to do hasn't been decided yet.

Nat said he thinks if there was great excitement on the selectboard for this committee we would have created it. Some voters made a strong argument for putting it on the warning. We are open to listening to the voters but if we really wanted it we would have created it last summer.

Greg Tatro said he thinks it is a decent idea to have other people looking at budgets but he does feel the selectboard does a great job and works hard. He thinks it is up to the selectboard to say if there is a way the community can help with the budget process or not. It is really up to the selectboard how much authority to give the committee. He is on the Planning Commission and they have trouble filling all the positions. Creating and filling another committee could be a challenge. He thinks the board should think about this. Maybe there is a way it could help take some of the pressure off.

**It was moved and seconded to call the question and the motion to call the question was passed by a voice vote.**

**The motion failed by a counted standing vote, with 17 voting in favor and 21 opposed.**

**Article 15. Shall the voters of the Town hear a report from the Johnson representatives on the Lamoille North School District?**

Mark Nielsen introduced himself. He is one of the 5 members who represent Johnson on the Lamoille North School District board, which encompasses 5 towns.

Regarding coronavirus, he wants to make sure everyone knows that between the selectboard, the school board, Northern Vermont University and the Studio Center there is quite a network of information on the latest state and federal guidelines. There was a student trip to Italy. Italy was starting to have problems with the virus so students were called back a couple of days early. Mark is not sure of the price tag to do that, but it was the right move. There is quite a communications network set up and it is working.

Mark thanked the residents who told him last year that communication between the school and town was not very good. The selectboard has given the school board time during their meetings at around 7:25 for him or another representative to be there and answer any questions. If there is a big enough issue he can go into the side room with people to talk about it.

There has been a lot of discussion on Front Porch Forum. From the annual school board meeting, the budget information meeting and follow-up conversations he has notes about things he would like to bring forward to the board related to the budget. There are pieces he feels can be

streamlined. There were some ideas on Front Porch Forum he wrote down that challenge the system. Those who post on Front Porch Forum may get a note from him following up. He wants to hear from people with different opinions.

Mark said one question on Front Porch Forum was what we are getting for this budget. Some 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students showed him what they have been doing with computers and robotics. There are 271 students enrolled at JES. This year, 42 of them will graduate and head to the middle school. The school district is not spending wildly. They are doing what they need to do to get kids educated and move them on to life. At the elementary level, the budget includes Spanish, a creators' lab/STEM program, and an ECHO partnership with the Leahy Center. One result of Act 46 was that principals were able to align curriculum throughout the district. At the middle school principal Wendy Savery takes all the kids and merges them into a melting pot. They develop team building skills and get prepared for high school. At the high school they have the new EPIC program. Mark wishes they had had that program when he was in high school. He has gone to some impressive demonstrations of what students are learning. It builds on their strengths and a teacher guides them and makes them stronger on their weaknesses. There are 1600+ students in the entire district, excluding Cambridge. Things are moving forward. When the budget came out of the subcommittee board members all sat around a table and calculated what their taxes were going to be. He feels it is easy to cut but much harder to sell what he thinks is right and what he believes in. Several members of the school board voted the budget down. He believes in our future. He believes our education system is what it needs to be.

Walter said he has already been in communication with Mark about this. Many people have read Walter's Front Porch Forum posts. Ultimately, Act 46 is a failure. Walter read quotes from informational material that was mailed out before the merger as examples of what we were promised. In 2017, the year before we merged, Cambridge's per pupil spending was \$13,816 and their tax rate was \$1.4242. Our spending and tax rate were almost identical: \$13,961 and \$1.4391. Four years later, Cambridge is proposing to spend \$16,816 per pupil and Lamoille North is proposing to spend \$18,278. Cambridge's proposed tax rate is \$1.5452 and Lamoille North's is \$1.6795. Cambridge's tax rate has gone up 12 cents over these 4 years and ours has gone up 24 cents. (He is just speaking about elementary schools.) Cambridge is spending less money and has a better teacher-student ratio. Their average teacher salary is higher than Johnson's. Their assessment scores are better. They are directing more money to classrooms and they are doing it more efficiently. Are we better off now than we were 4 years ago? He feels we are not.

He feels we as a community to a certain extent have lost control and stopped caring about our school. Local control is disappearing. For many years the community was involved in decisions and the school board knew what we wanted. The administration on Cricket Hill has no sense of community. They do not care about or interact with the community. He is coming to the conclusion that this has been a total failure. The bribe is about to end so there are no repercussions for leaving. There is under statute a way we can get out. Right now Southern Valley Unified Union School District is starting this process. It is a 2-member school district and both towns voted to withdraw. We are not going to be the first.

He doesn't think we have gained anything from merging. If anything we have gone backwards. Students are getting less. Taxpayers are paying more. As a community we are losing control. The

ivory tower on Cricket Hill doesn't care about us. When we have per pupil spending of \$18,276 we are approaching the excess spending threshold. If we have another budget increase next year like this we will cross it. That means the tax rate will double. The district is out of control in terms of spending. They are not getting good results. Cambridge is getting good results and having good financial results. So why are we still in this union?

When this was put before us it was put for 6 towns to join. Cambridge did not. When it was originally designed, our taxes were going to go up but by a small amount that might have been able to be overcome with efficiencies. But we had Cambridge to help bear the burden. Without Cambridge, the burden of towns with higher per-student expense is landing on Johnson. It is not our job to pay for other towns.

There is a process to get out of the merger. It is convoluted. There are multiple steps. He wants to start this process. The process needs to start by the Johnson selectboard calling a special meeting for this purpose. He communicated with Eric Osgood and asked, if he brought a motion to the floor would the selectboard consider it? Otherwise voters can petition. He will put a motion on the floor asking the selectboard to hold a special meeting. At this meeting he wants the school board, the union and everyone to have a chance to put the facts on the table. He is not asking voters to make a decision today. He is asking voters to ask the selectboard to start the process so we can have a meeting and get all the facts on the table. He has had a hard time getting all the facts he needs.

**Walter Pomroy moved that the voters of the Town of Johnson hereby request the selectboard of the Town of Johnson to call a special town meeting pursuant to 16 V.S.A. Section 724 for the purpose of deciding whether the Town of Johnson should withdraw from the Lamoille North Modified Unified Union School District #058A. Scott Meyer seconded.**

**Eric Hutchins objected to consideration of the question.**

David Williams said he will take that to be a motion essentially to overrule the moderator's ruling that this is discussable. Article 15 is a very general article simply asking if the voters will hear a report. In the course of hearing the report a non-binding motion has been made by Walter asking the selectboard to call a special meeting. Eric's objection is not debatable. If a majority vote yes on Eric's motion, they are voting not to continue discussion of Walter's motion. If the majority votes no we will continue to consider Walter's motion.

Jackie Stanton asked if we can hear more from Eric Hutchins about his objection. David Williams said Eric could reply.

Eric Hutchins said we have an article about whether to accept the report from the schools. Walter's motion has nothing to do with a report from the schools. Getting out of the union wouldn't just require a vote from our community but from the other towns in the union as well. Just because we didn't get the savings we thought we would, the idea that we would get savings from pulling out seems ridiculous. What Walter proposes is an unrealistic, unlikely scenario.

David Williams said his ruling that this is discussable can be overruled. However, there is nothing to prevent Walter from raising this again under Other Business.

**Eric Hutchins's motion to overrule the moderator failed by a voice vote.**

Mark Nielsen said he has asked the legislature to back its decision to force mergers. Cambridge not being part of the school district hurts the district financially. The process of getting out is quite a process and there is a financial piece to it. We have all signed articles of agreement. They come with financial pieces behind them. If we decided to withdraw we would have to settle up financially with the rest of the towns. That is why his position is that Cambridge should be forced to join the district. Then we can keep budgets lower. There is nothing extra in this budget. The budget increase was down to about 3.1% and then mandates from the state came in. Insurance costs and Hyde Park Electric costs are going up. The state said a food service group can no longer lose money so there will be a 30% jump in the cost of feeding children in the SU. He is not going to have kids come to school and not have food to eat. Kids get a breakfast option and they are served lunch. That all comes at a price and he feels kids will eat no matter where the budget lands. The process of getting out of the unified union is quite a mountain to climb. He is happy to listen to how Walter wants to go about doing it. But he has taken the position that we should try to pull Cambridge in.

A voter asked what the odds are of pulling in Cambridge. Mark Nielsen said when the two votes were held Cambridge spent time convincing their residents to vote no. He feels we didn't do a good job getting people out to vote yes. He is not sure he has a really good answer but one idea he has is to sit down with legislators and say this has to happen.

Eric Hutchins said he agrees with Walter about a lot of the problems coming out of Act 46. He disagrees about solutions. Leaving the district will require Waterville, Eden and Belvidere all to vote yes. The idea that a 1600 student district is unmanageable or out of touch with people he thinks is not accurate. You will not find a more compassionate group of people than the school district administrators and the superintendent. The idea that central office is not compassionate about listening to people is inaccurate. Tax rates have gone up. That has happened in correlation with the Act 46 merger, but the main driver is skyrocketing healthcare costs. It is not because of the merger. If Cambridge had joined it would not have happened to the same degree. Mark is saying the best solution is making sure the state forces the merger on Cambridge. That could alleviate some issues. As far as approaching the excess spending threshold, we are not close and he is sure the board would not go over it. He thinks there could still be realization of savings from the Act 46 merger. Elementary schools are sharing resources now, but that doesn't happen overnight. There are probably a lot of ways to share resources that haven't happened yet. He would be interested to see what withdrawal would look like as far as numbers but he thinks just because rates went up when we joined, withdrawing doesn't mean they will go back down.

Walter said he has heard people talking about the health insurance mandates as drivers of tax rates. The selectboard had a budget that cut the tax rate and they are dealing with the same health insurance issues. Cambridge is dealing with the exact same mandates and they are doing it at lower tax rates. They are providing more teachers for their classrooms and paying them more.

People say this is a convoluted, difficult process but if we don't take the first step we will never get there. Once we start talking as a community about problems with this merger he thinks the other towns will stand up and say we are right. Hopefully things will get fixed. But he doesn't see it happening based on the school district annual meeting. They cherry pick numbers. He felt he was being lied to. We are less than \$500 away from the excess spending threshold. If we have the same increase this coming year we will blow right through the excess spending threshold. He doesn't want to wait. He wants to start this process. He has heard people ask good questions. He wants answers to them. That is why he wants a special meeting. He is not necessarily ready to vote yet, but he wants information on Johnson's finances on a standalone basis. Those answers may change his mind. Ultimately, having a good debate serves democracy, our students and our citizens. The debate hasn't been happening. There were 13 people at the school district's annual meeting and 6 people at the budget information meeting. Johnson needs to be the one leading the union district to wake up and see that things need to change. If they are not going to change, he wants to get off this sinking ship.

**The motion was passed by a voice vote.**

**Article 16. Shall the voters of the Town of Johnson review the report provided by the Center for Governmental Research on the question of merging the Town and Village?**

Eric Osgood said this article was put in as a placeholder. We were hoping we would have the report from the consultant by town meeting. Unfortunately we do not have it, so he will just ask that the voters pass over this.

**Dean West moved that the voters pass over Article 16 but that an informational meeting be held as soon as the report provided by the Center for Governmental Research is available for the public.**

Casey Romero suggested a friendly amendment – that the selectboard could present the report at a regular selectboard meeting and that could be communicated so those interested could come.

Dean said his concern is that this has been going on for a few years. He would like it not to stall. He thinks the only way to prevent that and get to some kind of conclusion is for the voters to hear the report when it is available and then continue to a conclusion.

David Williams said the voters can only postpone a motion, not an agenda item. There could be a motion to hear the report and then a motion to postpone that motion.

**Dean West moved and Lynda Hill seconded that the voters of the Town of Johnson review the report provided by the Center for Governmental Research on the question of merging the Town and Village.**

David Williams suggested there could be a motion to postpone that motion to a definite time. Dean asked if the selectboard has any idea when the report will be complete. Eric said there is no set deadline. We got a draft a week ago Friday. Some errors were found and we will have to work with the consultant to get the errors corrected. At some point after that the consultant will

send the report out to the town and village. Eric suggested the motion could be postponed until the next regular selectboard meeting following receiving the report.

**Dean West moved to postpone the motion to the next regular selectboard meeting after the report from the Center for Governmental Research is received and the motion was seconded.**

Jon Gregg said the rumor was that we had a draft but things in it were wrong and it didn't get printed in time for the meeting. How many pages is it? Brian Story said 11 or 12. Jon asked if the board could come up with an executive summary and leave a stack of those at the town clerk's office. If people have the information he doesn't see why we need a special meeting. If the board puts out an executive summary of maybe 2-3 pages then people can read it and won't have to come to another meeting and start fresh. Eric Osgood said it's not our report, it's the consultant's. We don't want to paraphrase it. The intent was to mail it to every resident before town meeting. Jon asked why the board can't do that when they get it. Eric said we will have to have a special town meeting to discuss it.

Mike Dunham said we did have a report but it was flawed. It was decided in an emergency meeting of the selectboard and village trustees not to go to the voters with a flawed report. Both boards decided to correct the figures in the report, but not the narrative. Once the figures are all corrected and we have a clean report we plan on putting it out. He would support having a special town meeting, not discussing it at a regular selectboard meeting because we don't have the room. This is important. We have discussed this for over 20 years and it took us 2 years to agree on an individual to do the study. We are going to get it corrected and will have a good report for the town.

A voter suggested just leaving it up to the selectboard to call a special town meeting when they are ready.

Nat noted that the word "selectmen" had been said a few times in the course of the meeting and he asked that people use "selectboard" or "selectboard members."

**Dean West and the seconder of the motion to postpone the motion to a time certain agreed to withdraw the motion. Dean West and the seconder of the motion to review the report agreed to withdraw that motion.**

**Dean West moved that as soon as the report provided by the Center for Governmental Research on the question of merging the Town and Village is received in appropriate form it be distributed to the voters and that the selectboard schedule a public review of the report at a reasonable time. The motion was seconded and passed by a voice vote.**

**Article 17. To transact such other business as may properly be brought before this Town.**

Ken Tourangeau said he would like the town to consider an amendment to the ATV ordinance to allow ATV's to travel on Railroad Street across the Lamoille River.

Eric Osgood said we currently have a town ATV ordinance restricting ATV's to Class 3 dirt roads and Class 4 roads. He thinks Ken is asking for a change that would allow ATV's to go down Railroad Street to the village to access gas stations. The selectboard would have to make an ordinance change and the voters would have a certain number of days to raise a petition for a town vote.

Scott Meyer said he is wondering how it works with the state highway. Eric said he doesn't know. We can authorize them on our highways. He is not sure how it works with the state.

Ken said as far as the state highway, the state is okay with ATV's using any road as long as the town is okay with it. He already has paperwork filled out for a state permit. The state wants to make sure the town is not against it and then they will okay it.

Peter Moynihan asked if Ken can be more specific about where the ATV group wants to go. Ken said the ultimate goal is to get across the Lamoille River. He is trailmaster for a local ATV group. Many people have to haul their ATV's to an Eden trailhead to get across the Lamoille River. They don't want to be on pavement but they need to get gas and food. Last year Morrisville allowed ATV's to get to Mac's for a limited time period. He believes they have had zero complaints and will continue to allow it. He has explored with AOT about accessing the rail trail bridge just to get across the Lamoille. They suggested building a bridge, which is expensive and not feasible for the group.

Lynda Hill asked, they want to go down Railroad Street and across the bridge to the rail trail? Ken said no, they can't ride on the rail trail by law. They just want to get to the other side. Roads on the other side of the Lamoille are open already. They just want to get to parcels of land on the other side.

Lynda said she has a little concern about Railroad Street because it is already busy with kids, traffic and bikes in summer. Ken said they understand that but ATV's are motor vehicles. They pay stage registration and have to be insured. They have to join a club.

Jan Perkins said if you legalize ATV's to travel the roads you will find they will obey the law. They won't try to go too fast. New Hampshire and Maine have it figured out. They bring in tourism. They bring money to the community. She thinks ATV's are a great thing and we should listen to what the riders want.

Ken said he knows of 8 businesses on Main Street in Johnson that support the use of Main Street by ATV's as long as the state okays it. If we could make Main Street and Railroad Street ATV friendly it would do nothing but bring business to town. When ATV's were allowed to travel to Jolley's they greatly improved gas sales there.

Richard Simays said that at a special meeting last week the Johnson Historical Society unanimously approved a statement that because Scribner Bridge is the only original covered bridge in Johnson the Historical Society strongly and passionately supports Scriber Bridge. If preservation of the bridge on site is not possible they feel a site should be found to relocate the bridge.

Scott Meyer said he has asked for an update on the cost associated with the industrial park property so far.

Eric Osgood said other than paying down the note the town has not put any money into it. The town is applying for a \$1.2 million grant that it looks like we are very competitive for, in order to pay for getting an access road and utilities into the property.

Scott asked how many grants we have tried for and what our success record is.

Brian Story said this is the third or fourth application. He has been working with EDA for about 6 months without submitting an application. The idea is that with a long process everyone in the chain is already familiar with the application and all their questions are answered. He has a great deal of confidence that the grant application will be successful but he hasn't filed it yet. We want to get the yes and then make the application. He is working with individuals and organizations to make sure we are successful in our applications, so the number of applications made can be misleading.

Brian said we haven't spent money on the property since we purchased it. He has spent some of his time. He would estimate the cost of that is a little under \$2500. We got a \$25K loan from LEDC to pay for a feasibility study before the purchase. We will pay that back when lots have sold. We spent about \$35-40K for studies on site conditions and appraisals to assess feasibility before the purchase. Since purchase of the property there has been no expense other than Brian's time.

**Dick Cross moved to adjourn and the motion was seconded and passed by a voice vote. The meeting was adjourned at 3:39.**

*Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths*

Meeting videotaped by Green Mountain Access Television. GMATV info: <https://greenmountainaccess.tv/>; PO Box 581, Hyde Park, 05655; info@greenmountainaccess.tv or 802-851-1592