

JOHNSON VILLAGE TRUSTEE BOARD MEETING MINUTES  
ELECTRONIC MEETING VIA ZOOM AND PHONE CALL-IN  
MONDAY, JANUARY 11, 2021

**Present:**

Trustees: Steve Hatfield, Will Jennison, Scott Meyer, Athena Parke

Others: Meredith Dolan, Rosemary Audibert, Dan Copp, Troy Dolan, Duncan Hastings, Eric Osgood

**Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.**

**1. Call to Order**

Vice-chair Scott called the meeting to order at 6:02.

**2. Changes, Additions to Proposed Agenda**

Meredith added an information item under Treasurer's Report about inventory software.

**3. Acceptance of Gordy Smith Resignation**

As requested by Gordy, Scott read Gordy's resignation letter:

*Dear Meredith,*

*Dec. 15, 2020*

*It is with much regret that I write this email. Last night was the straw that broke the camel's back. I am tired of being singled out and held to a higher standard than other select board or trustees. The barrage that is constant against me and my fellow trustees and you Meredith is non stop in what we say or how I try to run the trustee meetings in being fair to speakers but also trying to get the village monthly business done in a timely fashion. There is a saying, "If you aren't part of the solution, then you must be part of the problem". I hate to leave you Meredith and you fellow Trustees in this time of divisiveness with some people not willing to compromise. I have publicly and privately reached out to people in our community but things don't improve. I say to myself that the next monthly Trustee meeting will get better, but they only get worse. I have enjoyed working with all of you. These trustee meetings have become too stressful and non-productive and it is time to let go. It is with sadness, this letter is my letter of resignation effective immediately. I have strong faith that you four and Meredith will stay strong, and look out for the best interests for all Johnson citizens and businesses.*

*Respectfully Submitted,*

*Gordy Smith*

Scott expressed his gratitude to Gordy. He has done a lot for the community as a firefighter, fire warden, member of the emergency management team and trustee. Scott is grateful for his service and sad not to have his knowledge about the village on the board.

**Will moved to accept with deep regret Gordy's resignation from the board of trustees, Athena seconded and the motion was passed.**

It was agreed to wait until Steve arrived to elect a board chair.

**4. Review and Approve Minutes of Trustee Meetings**

**Will moved to approve the minutes of December 14, 2020, Athena seconded and the motion was passed.**

**5. Treasurer's Report / Review and Approve Bills and Warrants / Budget Status / Action Items**

The board reviewed the budget status reports. Meredith noted that we budgeted for \$6,000 worth of miscellaneous income in the general department because we thought we might need to pull that out of reserve if we didn't get \$6,000 from the college, but we did get the money from the college. Fire department calls were down this year. Office administrative expenses are over budget. Meredith said she needs to review that with Rosemary. It could have to do with how she coded her time. Legal expenses were over budget. Some of the expense was for reviewing the union contract. Will asked what we can expect for legal expenses next year. Meredith said it may depend on what happens with the vote on the merger. *(Steve arrived at 6:19.)*

Scott asked if we are done with the work needed at the municipal building. Meredith said no. Due to the pandemic we weren't able to get work done on the tower this year. That is still needed. She believes the town is going to include that in their new budget and we would do the same.

Meredith said the fire department is finishing pretty far under budget on salaries and benefits because calls were down. Will questioned why fire department low angle water rescue expenses were different from what was budgeted.

For electric department income, Meredith said we budgeted for some money from the reserve fund. We will have to see if that ends up being necessary. She believes it won't be because of some projects we didn't do. Residential sales were up. Small commercial sales were about 88% of budget, college sales were about 80% of budget and sales to public authorities were about 90% of budget.

Will ask how delinquencies are looking. Meredith said as of December 20, bills 30 days or more past due total \$23,613. For the same time in 2019 she found a figure of \$44,000 but she thinks the way the reports were run it may not be an apples to apples comparison. She noted that the disconnection moratorium has been reinstated. We will be over budget on purchased power costs.

Water sales were 10% under budget. Meredith said we chose not to make some planned capital purchases for the water department in 2020 because we knew revenue would be under budget.

Sewer revenue is about 5.5% under budget. We had budgeted for some projects that we didn't do, most notably the cupola project. We are planning to do that in 2021, assuming we can afford it.

Dan noted that he thinks he possibly miscoded a load of sludge to trash/recycling.

Pumping station expense was way over budget because we coded the Aldrich and Elliot design work to that. That was not budgeted for. We will be getting a loan to cover those costs.

Meredith said after we completed the last audit there was a recommendation from the auditor about how we do inventory. She asked them to give us some additional insight and assistance. Recently she, Susan, Marla and Rosemary had a Zoom call with them to get guidance. One suggestion was that we look into inventory management software. Meredith will try to get cost estimates and talk

to other VPPSA members about what they use. Rosemary said prices she saw ranged from around \$40 a month to several hundred dollars a month.

**6. Election of New Board Chair**

Will nominated Scott for board chair, seconded by Steve. **The board voted to elect Scott Meyer as board chair.**

**7. Water/Wastewater Report and Action Items**

The E-DMR and Wr-43 were submitted for review. There were no callouts for the wastewater plant. Dan performed a safety inspection throughout the facility. Grating clips were installed throughout the plant where they were missing and chain was put up where there are some upper railings missing where the old clarifiers were. This is an area employees are never in. That area was chained off and a DO NOT ENTER sign was put up. Total cost was under \$30. County Oil re-checked the glycol percentage in the heating system. Dan submitted all year end reports to ANR including the annual Phosphorus Optimization report.

Dan attended a virtual meeting about using Wastewater Based Epidemiology (WBE) to look for SARS-CoV-2 in wastewater. This is a collaboration between Norwich University, Saint Michaels College and the University of Vermont. They are in the beginning stages of getting funding for the project. They want to look at COVID 19 testing and what this technology could be used for beyond this also. Dan expressed interest in the project for Johnson and they appreciated the knowledge that the wastewater operators that were present brought to the table. There will be virtual meetings on this every 2 weeks. Dan will keep the board updated as it progresses.

Coliform results were negative. County Oil worked on the furnace at the water plant. They replaced multiple worn parts. It is up and running properly. The membrane on the chlorine analyzer at the plant was serviced and replaced. The water plant, Clay Hill booster station and Nadeau well house were thoroughly cleaned. We received official notice from the state that we will not be required to test for PFA's in our drinking water for 3 years. We have had a non-detect result each of the last 2 years. Water loss was 17%.

**8. Foreman Report and Action Items**

The crew installed two new 200 amp secondary services at 90 Clay Hill that will serve two rental properties at that location. On January 2, the crew responded to an outage at 83 VT Route 100C. A tree came down due to snow load and ripped the service wires off the house. Only this property was affected by the outage and power was restored within an hour. The crew also completed monthly meter reading, high/low checks, and Dig Safes.

We installed the water meter and turned on water service at 24 Clay Hill, which is the remodeled Studio Center building. The on-call crew responded to an after-hours no water call at Katy Win Mobile Home Park. The issue was on the customer end with frozen pipes under the mobile home.

Even with the light snow so far this winter, the crew has had to do regular sidewalk maintenance to keep them free from ice. Four crew members came in early on January 2 to plow Main Street and clear the sidewalks. The process known as "picking up snow" was completed on January 6 during normal work hours.

2021 NEPPA monthly safety trainings have been scheduled. They will be virtual classes at least through May due to the pandemic. Annual truck and tool di-electric testing was scheduled for

January 19 but has been postponed because both contractors scheduled to come to Johnson have contracted Covid-19.

Troy created an estimate for Travis Hill related to the two new secondary services at 90 Clay Hill. He met with GW Savage to evaluate the village garage so they can create an estimate to remediate the building. The testing of substation transformers and the disposal of old transformers has been postponed due to Covid-19. All water, sewer, and electric inventory has been counted and completed as part of our 2020 audit.

Scott asked if outside contractors coming in are going through temperature checks and the questionnaire. Troy said all we have had is the person who cleans the bathroom. The representative from GW Savage didn't do a temperature check but he wore a mask and they stayed six feet apart, and he was inspecting outside.

Duncan Hastings said back in the early 2000s when the town and village purchased the property where the water and light garage is, the intent was that water and light would move into the lower building. It seems to him that if the village is going to have to put money into the upper building, moving to the lower building and turning the upper one into cold storage might be more cost effective, at least in the short term.

Meredith said she did think about that but pretty quickly decided that that was not a good option. The building is technically in the flood zone and the road by the building has had water on it at times. We evacuate our vehicles out of the building whenever there is a flood watch. That is the main reason we felt it didn't make sense to use that building for our main operations. Troy also identified some problems with the building itself. A considerable amount of work would have to go into that building to get it up to where we would want it to be. There is moisture and signs of mold there as well. The boilers are in poor condition. We would want to add some windows. There have been rodent problems. The walls are wet at the bottom. Site work would have to be done. We would still need to use the current garage because there is not space for everything in one building and there would still have to be remediation done to the current building if people are going to go into it at all. The biggest issue with using that building is the danger of flooding and the possible loss of access and equipment.

Scott suggested tabling this discussion for now until we have more facts and figures. The board agreed to that.

**9. Excess Water Bill Adjustment – 24 West Highland Drive**

Meredith said the homeowner at 24 West Highland Drive requested a water bill adjustment due to a leak that went through the homeowner's meter. The pipes that were leaking were the responsibility of Harvey's Mobile Home Park and they agreed to pay for the excess water, but the homeowner is seeking adjustment to the sewer bill because the water flowed through the sewer. Our policy calls for adjusting the sewer bill to the amount of the highest sewer bill from the past 12 months, which would be \$32.12. **Will moved to adjust the sewer bill for 24 West Highland Drive from \$190.89 to \$32.12, Athena seconded in the motion was passed.**

**10. Approve 2021 Contract Towns Fire Services Contribution Levels**

Meredith said the town asked to know what the fire services increase will be for their budgeting. Arjay West is recommending a 2% increase across the board for the three contract towns. In order to keep up with inflation in their capital plan they need to raise an additional \$2,800 this year. A

2% increase raises \$2,462 and Arjay believes with other cost control measures the rest of the budget can absorb the additional amount. A 2% increase for Johnson is \$1,762. The trustees will be asked in the future to approve the line by line budget for the fire department but Arjay was able to provide this information for now.

**Will moved and Steve seconded to implement a 2% increase in fire service contract town contributions for 2021.** Will asked if the selectboard needs a hard number now or the general direction. Meredith said she believes Johnson is looking for a hard number. Eric Osgood said the selectboard plans to meet this Wednesday to go through the budget and they really do need that number. He expects they will finalize their budget on January 18.

Will asked, if we don't have a hard number yet, would it be a good idea to give them a number a little higher than what Arjay is asking for? Scott said he thinks that would be wise. Eric said the voting for town meeting will be by Australian ballot so the budget can't be amended on the floor. There is no way to increase the amount once the number is sent out. Will said he would be more comfortable telling them there will be a 3% increase and then doing our best to keep it at 2%. Scott agreed. Athena said she is okay with that.

Meredith asked if we are giving Arjay approval to make the increase up to 3%. Will asked what 1% equals in terms of dollars. Meredith said she thinks about \$800. Will said he would rather have the selectboard need to raise \$800 more in taxes than have the amount budgeted not be enough. Eric said it would be great if the trustees could have the number finalized by January 18.

**Will and Steve agreed to the friendly amendment of authorizing an increase of up to 3% for service contract contributions from Johnson, Waterville and Belvidere for 2021. The motion was passed.**

Meredith asked, if Arjay goes through the budget and gets a firm number that is less than 3%, does she have authority to communicate that to the towns? Will said that would be his intent.

#### ***11. 2021 Annual Meeting Planning***

Meredith said last year we had to delay the village annual meeting and we ultimately opted to have all the voting done by Australian ballot with a Zoom informational meeting. She thinks that worked relatively well. We need to decide how we want to go forward this year. She would recommend doing the same thing as last year. At this point the legislature hasn't approved allowing us to mail ballots to every voter. We should know soon if they will allow that. She suggests that the board make a motion that we do that if it is approved by the legislature.

Meredith said normally anyone who wants to be on the ballot to run for election as a trustee needs a petition signed by 1% of voters. She believes the legislature has passed a bill saying that that requirement is waived this year. Anyone can submit their name to be placed on the ballot. The board needs to decide how we want to treat ballot questions. Do we want to still require people to get signed petitions or waive that requirement? Rosemary said those normally require 5% of voters to sign, which is 45 signatures. Meredith said she believes the selectboard voted to waive that requirement for the town. If we waive the requirement it makes it easier for people to get questions on the ballot. If something really inappropriate is submitted she would check with our attorney to see if we have to accept it. Rosemary said petitions are due February 18.

**Will moved to waive the signature requirement for petitions for ballot questions for the 2021 annual meeting, seconded by Athena.** Athena said she thinks that makes a lot of sense because we are still in the pandemic. Scott said he sent out Covid stats this morning. Every time he does that he is alarmed by the uptick. The new variant has spread to more states. He thinks as far as public health is concerned the right thing to do is to waive the signature requirement. **The motion was passed.**

**Will moved to conduct voting for the 2021 village meeting by Australian ballot, Steve seconded and the motion was passed.**

Meredith said she believes the state is proposing to fund postage for mailing out ballots. Rosemary said she heard today that we should be able to get reimbursement for all postage costs.

Will asked, if we mail ballots to all village voters, when ballots are returned is there a check and balance to make sure ballots are accounted for? Rosemary said yes.

**Will moved and Athena seconded to approve mailing ballots to all registered village voters for the upcoming 2021 village meeting if the legislature approves doing so.**

Scott read Diane Lehouillier's comment from the chat that if the village mails ballots to all voters more people will probably vote. She said it is important and safe.

**The motion was passed with Scott, Athena and Steve voting yes and Will voting no.**

**12. *Timeline for 2021 Budget Development***

Meredith showed a proposed timeline for budget development. She proposes looking at the first draft of the water, sewer and fire department budgets at the regular February meeting, having a special meeting the week of February 22 to go through the first drafts of the general department and electric department budgets and looking at drafts of all department budgets at the regular March meeting. If there are still outstanding questions at that meeting we could have a special meeting in March. We would send reports out the week of March 22. Rosemary said she thinks that timeline looks good.

Will noted that the chat was open. Meredith said she is not sure why. It should not be open. She asked members of the public please not to chat as the board will not be reading the chat.

**13. *"Better Places" Grant Opportunity***

Meredith said the Better Places grant program is a relatively new one that the Agency of Commerce and Community Development put together. They will be offering grants of \$5K to \$25K for state-designated town and village centers. We have a designated village center. Meredith thought the grant might be a good fit for electrical work at the village green. We have heard from some people that the current electrical facilities there are not ideal for safety and utility. Kyle Nuse and Joie Lehouillier have also brought up an interest in public art, and planning documents have suggested more of that for Johnson. Johnson Works is interested in additional holiday decorations for Main Street. Kyle is interested in a mural for the village green area. Meredith is not sure there is consensus yet that a mural is the best fit for the village green but she thinks work on electrical hookups could be done relatively easily. Troy thought it would be doable to put up utility grade garland on Main Street poles as long as it will not be difficult to store. She recommends seeking grant funds for electrical upgrades at the green and additional decorations for Main Street. Garland

or ribbon to wrap the poles has been mentioned. Grant applications are due January 22 so there is not a lot of time to review options and scenarios. She thinks the project needs to be completed by the end of August.

Will asked if we have a ballpark cost figure for the electrical portion. Meredith said Troy thought it would probably cost around \$5K. Christmas decorations are quite expensive. The snowflakes we bought cost over \$10K. She could see us using close to \$20K between the two projects. Will said he would put priority on electrical hookups for the village green, with any remaining funds to be considered for any other beautification project.

**Will moved and Athena seconded to apply for a Better Places Grant with improvement of electrical utilities at the village green as the priority for grant funds and any remaining funds applied to beautification.**

Athena thanked Kyle Nuse for finding this grant. It looks ideal. She also had the idea of a mural and she wants to see it happen but she thinks it makes sense to get wiring in the ground. She agrees that more art for Johnson is great and she would love to see a mural in the future.

**The motion was passed.**

***14. Select Date for Interview of Interim Trustee Candidates***

Meredith said she has received one application for the open trustee position and she is hoping to get more this week. She will repost the opening on Front Porch Forum. The board agreed to meet at 6:00 on Tuesday, January 19 to interview candidates for the trustee board and make a selection.

***15. Select Potential Dates for Special Trustee Meeting***

Meredith said for the special trustee meeting requested by members of the public, she has reached out to potential moderators without success. It may be helpful if we can agree on several dates so she can give potential moderators more options. After discussion the board came up with two potential dates: January 27 and February 2.

***16. Covid-19 Response Check-In & Utility Update***

Meredith gave the current arrearages figures. She said they are not outrageous but she is concerned that they could increase with the resumption of the disconnection moratorium. Scott asked if the combined statewide figures submitted to the state on arrearages are available online. Meredith said she is not sure. Scott said it would be nice for our state representatives to have that information.

***17. Adjourn***

**Will moved to adjourn at 7:56, Athena seconded and the motion was passed.**

*Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths*