

JOHNSON SELECTBOARD MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
MONDAY, JANUARY 24, 2022

Present:

Selectboard members: Mike Dunham, Beth Foy, Nat Kinney, Eric Osgood, Eben Patch

Others: Brian Story, Rosemary Audibert, Kyle Nuse

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Eric called the meeting to order at 6:59.

2. Additions, Changes to Agenda

It was agreed to switch the order of the two main agenda items.

3. Review and Approve Town Meeting Format and Warning

Eric said a big question for the board to decide is whether to have in-person town meeting or voting by Australian ballot. He is conflicted and would go along with the majority.

Eben asked if the school said they would allow it. Brian said he believes they will. He is still in ongoing discussion with them. They understand that we will encourage masks but can't turn people away so we can't require masks or limit occupancy to their maximum.

Mike said he has asked people in town their opinion on this. One person told him they had heard someone else say we should meet in person because kids are in school, most businesses are open and people are working, so it is not like town meeting puts people at increased risk because everyone is already exposed. But this person's argument against that is that while they do go out in public, they limit their exposure to about 15 minutes. Town meeting will last longer than that. Some people who were initially in favor of it have changed their minds. He would say of the people he has talked to probably 50% are in favor of in-person town meeting and 50% are against it. He gets the impression that the board is getting to the point where they don't want in-person town meeting. Eric asked Mike's personal thoughts. Mike said Dr. Fauci said today that he thought the latest round of COVID would peak in mid-February, so by the 1st of March the situation could be different. But we have to decide tonight. Going by the information we have, we probably should err on the side of caution. It is too bad we couldn't poll people to see whether they want to come or not. We want maximum participation. The information meetings were not very well attended last year. But he is not in favor of mailing out ballots to everyone. People can always request an absentee ballot. Some people enjoy voting in person.

Nat said in the best of times town meeting has excluded people who have to work, which has always troubled him, but this year it will exclude people who are immunocompromised or living with someone who is immunocompromised and people living with young kids who can't be vaccinated. That affects his decision. Hospitals and healthcare workers are overburdened now. Hospitalizations due to COVID are at an all-time high today. He thinks we should err on the side of caution. One or two selectboard members might have to miss

town meeting due to COVID. If they do, that puts a burden on the remaining members. Everyone would need to be prepared to stand up and explain the budget.

Eben said another option would be to delay town meeting to June. Mike said he doesn't want to do that.

Beth said she thinks we should not have town meeting in person. She values in-person town meeting very much but voter participation at in-person town meeting even before the pandemic was much lower than the participation we saw last year. And even though many events are going on in our community that many people are attending, typically the longest event is an hour or an hour and a half, not a whole day. She thinks it is problematic to meet for a whole day without having a mask mandate. She thinks we care about our residents more than that.

Eben said there is value both ways. Participation is a lot better if we mail out ballots. There is a way for people to request absentee ballots already. He would not want one of our employees to catch COVID because they were at town meeting. But we could increase the ventilation in the school and not serve food to make it as safe as possible and then meet in person. Or we could have town meeting outside. Eric said he doesn't know if we want to wait until June for town meeting in case the budget is voted down.

Rosemary said if polling is at the school library that is a very small room where people would all be crowded together. She would rather see polling at the municipal building where people can come in one way and leave another way. Brian said he would like to think about our volunteer justices of the peace. We have a lot of older individuals. He doesn't know their status but older individuals are generally at higher risk.

Kyle said she has been polling people in her circle. She thinks people feel they want one more year of not having in-person town meeting. She loves town meeting and she put a lot of time and energy into making it as inclusive as possible but the more she thinks about it she doesn't think it is the right thing to do this year. She agrees that the municipal building is a better place to do the polling for flow and space.

Mike said someone told him today that if someone gets sick or there is a COVID outbreak because of town meeting everyone will be up in arms about it. It's not like we force people to come but it is sanctioned by the town and certain people would feel an obligation to come to it. Initially he was for meeting in person but he could support Australian ballot.

Eben asked if the informational meetings would be in person. Eric said we can talk about that. Last year they were on Zoom. We could do both Zoom and in-person or we could wait to decide until later. Informational meetings are typically not well attended. We probably could have them in person.

Nat moved not to have town meeting in person and to have Australian ballot voting for all items instead and to have two informational meetings. Rosemary said we are only required to have one. **Beth seconded.** Nat said he thinks having two informational meetings

makes it easier for more people to give their input. **The motion was passed with Mike and Eben opposed.**

4. Review and Approve FY23 Proposed Budget

Brian said there have been some changes that reduce our estimated year-end surplus for FY22. Eben said the amount of surplus would change if we buy a trailer out of this year's budget. Brian said we could assume about \$15K for that purchase and take that out of our anticipated surplus.

Brian said there has been a revision to the library's budget. They are anticipating a little less in grant funds. There will be a reduction in both income and expenditures, with no change to the bottom line.

Mike said he is still not sold on increasing hours for a library employee so we have to spend \$10K more on insurance. Brian said the estimated additional cost for pro-rated insurance is about \$10K. The employee could select a different plan that costs less than the estimate. Mike said he doesn't think we can afford it. Eric said that is a discussion we should have had when the library brought their budget in. It is a little late now to tell them we are going to do something different with their budget. The board as a whole decided to accept it. Eben asked if the library trustees approved giving the youth librarian pro-rated insurance. Brian said yes. Nat said he still strongly supports the increased hours and insurance for the youth librarian. He thinks it is worth every penny for youth education and literacy in our community. There is an issue of fairness. This puts our part-time youth librarian on par with the part-time rec coordinator. It is not fair to allow benefits for one and not the other.

Brian said there is a new line this year for a recreation reserve fund contribution. We have a reserve fund for recreation but it hasn't been getting a lot of contributions the last couple of years because of COVID. We are proposing to make a contribution to it for replacements and future improvements. Beth said when she was on the rec committee she was very interested in level funding recreation. She would prefer not to add the proposed \$2K expense this year for putting money in the reserve fund. She would rather wait until we get programs going again and see more revenue. She proposes taking that out for this year. Eben said he is fine with that. Mike said if we had in-person town meeting, someone could say they thought this line was not a good idea and make a motion to strike it and then the board would have to remove that from the budget, correct? Eric said not exactly. The motion would reduce the total budget by that amount, not change a specific line, but the board would probably listen to the will of the voters. Mike said since we are not having town meeting this year people won't have the option to remove the money for this unless they vote the whole budget down. The board agreed to remove this from the budget.

Eric noted that one of the year end expenditure estimates should be changed from \$40K to \$45, reducing the surplus by \$5K.

Eben said asked if the proposal for FY23 is to spend \$4050 in miscellaneous reimbursements on the trailhead project plus another \$5K from the town or if the \$4050 received would be part of the \$5K contributed by the town. Brian said we would hope to get the \$4050 contribution and we would pay an additional \$5K out of our coffers. Eben said he doesn't

think we should contribute \$5K. Eric asked, the budget shows \$4K coming in and \$9K going out for the trailhead project, correct? Brian said yes. If the expected \$4K doesn't come in we would not be obligated to spend more than \$5K.

Eben said we are asking taxpayers to spend \$5K on a project we told them they weren't going to pay for. Nat said he has a different take on that. Mark Alexander has committed in email to funding another \$15K. Our \$5K contribution will get us to the total we need for the project. Mike asked, for our \$5K contribution we get a contribution of \$15K? And if the town did not give \$5K the Alexanders might not be interested in giving \$15K? Nat said no, but without our \$5K we would be short on money for the project. Mike said he agrees with Eben. This was not going to be a cost for the town, then it turned into phases 1 and 2. Eben said he thinks it is a great asset but everything more we put at the trailhead will be a burden on taxpayers in the future. He is not against doing more there, but the board should hold true to promises made by the past board. He proposes striking \$5K from line 168.

Nat said he fully supports the \$5K. He has given all his reasons before. Beth said she doesn't love the idea of spending it, but it's a small fraction of the total expenditure and she thinks she heard we could raise money for it. She supports it. Eric said he would support keeping it. The Alexanders gave us \$45K and we thought we could do the project with that but due to the rise in the cost of materials it couldn't happen. If they are now committing more, he would like to see it finished and he thinks the taxpayers would appreciate it.

Kyle Nuse said she agrees with Eric. The rail trail is finally going to be completed this coming year so she feels welcome centers and trailheads will be really valuable and will only bring good attention to our town, helping with economic development and potentially building our tax base. As a taxpayer she would support keeping it.

Eric said tomorrow at 7:00 there is a meeting at the tech center for Friends of the Rail Trail to get public input. Eben asked if anyone from the selectboard is attending. Eric said he is planning on it. Eben said he doesn't think he can attend, but one thing on the agenda for that meeting is ways to support the rail trail. He doesn't understand why all towns have taken on the burden of mowing along the rail trail. It is a state right of way and the state should maintain it. We are taking on liability and expense for a right of way that is not ours. Eric said that is a good thing to make mention of. The original request was that we mow it once a year. Brian said they want us to mow it more than twice a year now.

Brian asked if the board wants to increase expenditure for small equipment by \$15K in this year's budget for the trailer, reducing the end of year surplus by that amount.

Beth said the \$168K uncommitted cash on hand figure is a real number only if we get all delinquent taxes. We shouldn't be thinking of that as all ours. Eric said typically we get most of the delinquent taxes. He asked Rosemary what percentage we usually get. Rosemary said probably all but 5%. Beth said we should consider that the lowest balance we can expect during the year is only \$50K. If we add \$15-18K for the trailer, that reduces our lowest balance by \$15-18K. Brian said \$15K won't be enough to make us run a deficit. Beth said she is thinking about what might happen if we had spent the \$15K and then had an

unexpected expense. She is thinking about the safest time to buy the trailer from a cash flow perspective. Brian said from a need perspective, the best time to buy it is as soon as possible. From a cash flow perspective the best time is probably the second quarter of the next fiscal year. The board agreed to add the expense for the trailer to the current year's budget, reducing the year end surplus.

Rosemary showed the board a sample postcard that could be sent to voters telling them how to request absentee ballots. Brian said sending out postcards would be less expensive than mailing ballots to everyone. He thinks it is a good compromise. The board agreed to mail postcards rather than ballots to all voters and to discuss the exact wording on the postcard at a future meeting.

Kyle said the postcards look small. She suggested getting the word out to voters, for instance on Front Porch Forum, that the postcards are coming so they can keep an eye out for them. Brian said we could probably get bright colored card stock so they would be more visible in the mail. Mailing these is significantly cheaper than mailing ballots so we could afford to make them a little bigger or use colored paper.

Nat suggested we could have an ad in the News & Citizen. Brian said he doesn't know if we need an ad but he will talk to the News & Citizen about what we are doing. Eric said all local towns are having Australian ballot voting, so people will be aware of it.

The board discussed the warning. Eric said the intent of having a separate article for donations to nonprofits was so voters could have the ability to amend the article to change the donation amount for an organization. But there will be no opportunity to amend with Australian ballot voting. With that in mind, do we want to put the donations back into our regular budget? Mike and Eben said they preferred leaving it as a separate article. Nat, Beth and Eric said they preferred putting it back into the regular budget.

Eric asked if we want to keep the article asking if the voters will approve \$40K for community and economic development or if we want to put that back in our budget. Beth said she would like to leave it as a separate article. Eric said he thinks it would pass as a stand-alone article if we had the opportunity to explain it in person. With voting by Australian ballot he thinks the likelihood that it will pass is not as high. The board agreed to leave it as a separate article.

With voting by Australian ballot, there will be no separate article for selectboard compensation. It will be part of the budget and will remain status quo.

Brian suggested that having Zoom-only participation for the informational meetings would be easier to administer. Eric asked if we are still held to the requirement to have a physical meeting location. Brian said one of the bills before the governor removes that requirement. He doesn't know if it has gone through.

The board agreed to schedule informational meetings at 7:00 p.m. on February 22 and 4:00 p.m. on February 26.

The board agreed to meet at 5:45 on January 26 to review and approve the final versions of the budget and the warning.

5. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 8:19.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths

UNAPPROVED