

JOHNSON SELECTBOARD MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
MONDAY, JANUARY 5, 2022

Present:

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

Others: Brian Story, Rosemary Audibert, Stacey Waterman, Scott Griswold

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Eric called the meeting to order at 6:45.

2. Additions, Changes to Agenda

Nat added an update on highway personnel.

3. Review Invoices and Orders

The board reviewed and discussed invoices and orders. (*Mike arrived at 6:52.*)

4. Review and Approve Minutes of Meetings Past

Mike moved to approve the minutes of December 20, 2021 with the sentence “Mike asked about what sealing means” removed. Mike explained that he did not say those exact words. **Beth seconded and the motion was passed.**

5. Treasurer’s Report / Review and Approve Bills, Warrants, Licenses / Any Action Items

Rosemary said she had nothing for the board other than warrants to approve.

6. Review Planned Purchases

Brian said at the last meeting the board approved spring replacement for the new salt truck. The truck is sitting low and tilting to the side with the springs that came factory installed. The plan presented last time was not to replace all four springs but the recommendation from the people doing the spring replacement is to replace all four. The cost increases to about \$2,700. The board had previously approved spending up to \$2,000. **Eben moved to approve spending up to \$3,000 for spring replacement for the salt truck and the motion was seconded and passed.**

7. Update on Highway Personnel

Brian said some employees are recovering from COVID and doing well and some tested negative 5 days from their initial exposure and took another test today because of a second exposure but have not received results. We were able to keep up with maintaining roads and did not have to call for mutual aid from other towns. Alex Nadeau did more work than usual this week. His help was crucial. (*Scott Griswold arrived at 7:03.*)

8. Northern Emergency Medical Services Budget Report

Scott Griswold said NEMS call volume is down slightly. It has it dropped 2 years in a row. Costs are extremely high. Medical supply costs are up 30% and fuel costs are up 40%. They have had to increase payroll due to demand and difficulty finding help. The overall budget is an increase of 3%. Johnson's share is only going up 2.65% because of the results of the census. Johnson's increase in population was smaller than that of the other towns. The 2021 request for Johnson was \$141,507 and for next year it is \$145,121. NEMS has received a lot of COVID grants. They have been doing a lot of testing and vaccinations, mostly in Newport but in 2022 they also will do a lot in Lamoille and Washington Counties. They paid off the mortgage on their building 5 years early and also paid off two ambulances and two cardiac

monitors. Even though their normal income is down they feel they will be able to stabilize their budget over the next few years. They need to put a new roof on their building in Johnson. Their final budget will be sent to the towns soon.

Eric said Hyde Park and Johnson pay the lines share of the NEMS budget. He asked what the increase for Hyde Park was. Scott said Hyde Park had a 3.7% increase. Belvidere had a 4% increase, Eden had a 2.3% percent increase, and Waterville had a 3.1% increase.

Eric asked what Scott thinks the reason is for the decline in calls. Scott said 911 calls are up but transports are down. He thinks that is due mainly to a reduction in elective surgeries. Johnson 911 calls increased from 321 to 350 this year.

Nat asked how NEMS is doing for staffing. Scott said most of this year they have had two unfilled full-time paramedic positions. They are trying to fill them with part-time people. They just filled one. That helps their budget because they don't have to pay benefits. They are trying to work with schools and colleges to get people interested in EMS positions. *(Scott left at 7:13.)*

9. Budget Review

Mike said he had a question about the Racial Justice Committee meeting minutes expense. That wasn't included in their budget. Should it be? Other groups must all have a line item for minutes. Brian said the Planning Commission and DRB have separate line items for minutes. The expense for selectboard minutes is normally paid as part of the office personnel line item. He believes the Racial Justice Committee minutes expense was added to that. It could be split out and included as part of the RJC budget. Mike said he thinks costs for minutes should be assigned to the appropriate committee. Nat and Eric agreed that it should be consistent as to how it is handled for each group. Brian said he split out minute taking services for each board in the next budget draft. He thinks the Racial Justice Committee is the only group that doesn't have minute taking expenses as part of their budget.

Mike noted that we have been using Brosseau Fuels year after year. Do we go out to bid and do they always have the lowest bid? Brian said we don't typically go out to bid every year. We can go out to bid again for fuel if the board wants to. Mike said he thinks we should do it every year.

Brian went through the budget line by line. He said he wants to increase late tax penalty revenue a little based on actuals for the last few years. The board agreed. Brian said we probably can increase delinquent taxes a little, but he is less confident about that. The board agreed to increase the figure from \$25K to \$27K.

Brian increased some fees based on what we have seen in recent years. He lowered fish and game license fees as those have been headed down. Rosemary noted that people can buy fish and game licenses online now. The board decided the fish and game license amount is so low that it should just be zeroed out. It was also agreed to zero out the amount for parking violations for the same reason. After some discussion it was agreed to drop the amount for dog fines to \$200. Brian said we have rarely hit the projection for driveway permits. The board agreed to decrease that from \$750 to \$600.

Brian increased the revenue figures for state aid for highways, current use, maintenance for the grand list and PILOT based on recent history. For state highway grants he has what he thinks is a pretty safe estimate of \$60K but that is money in, money out.

Brian said the current year end estimate for overrun stone income is zero. He is hoping it will not actually be zero. He is hoping we can get some people in to help us with the pit. He proposes level funding that item for next year.

Brian budgeted a minor increase in interest on investments. With rising interest rates he thinks we might get a better return.

The board discussed how much to budget for revenue the Ted Alexander Welcome Center project. Nat said the Alexanders have committed \$3K for further work and we are exploring whether they are interested in funding more. Beth said she thinks for anything like this we should just budget and expense zero. If money is coming in specifically for a project it will be spent for that project. Eric said the budget includes expense for phase two so we need to budget offsetting revenue. If we are going to finish the project we should budget for it. Beth said whatever we do will be net zero. It was agreed to discuss this further in the future.

Brian said there are a lot of building projects we could do. The municipal building needs more work on the tower section and roof. The old mill house, Historical Society building and library also need work. He budgeted to take \$20K out of the building reserve fund for building projects.

Eric noted that if the Historical Society is going to take over the second story of the Holcomb House we will no longer have rental income from that apartment. Eben said the motion the board made was for the Historical Society to pursue doing that at no cost to the taxpayers, so we would still have the income. The board discussed possibly increasing the Historical Society contribution in lieu of rent. Beth said it doesn't seem feasible to her that they would increase their contribution by enough to make up for the loss in rent. Eric said he thinks their intent was to make the town whole if they took over the second story. But he doesn't think they will do that in the next year. Beth said the Holcomb House is a really big expense. If we are seriously considering giving over the second floor to the Historical Society and not extending the lease on the apartment we should cut the revenue line to reflect what we would actually get in income from the Historical Society.

Brian suggested leaving the rent for the back tenant the same because he is providing services to the town as a caretaker. The board agreed to increase the rent for the other apartment by 6%. It was also agreed to increase the contribution in lieu of rent from the Historical Society.

Brian said we need to start putting money into the reappraisal fund, which is near zero now.

Brian budgeted \$500 for wood fired oven committee revenue. The committee has consistently gotten grants for more than that. The amount is balanced on the expense side.

Tuesday Night Live revenue and expenses balance. The TNL committee is self funding.

Brian noted that he should add the revenue the Racial Justice Committee expects to the budget.

This draft includes money for an economic development coordinator. Beth asked if that could be put on a separate line and Brian agreed. He said the trustees also committed to seeing what it would look like to add an economic development coordinator to their budget. The board discussed putting an article on the town meeting warning to ask the voters whether to approve hiring an economic development coordinator.

Brian noted that the board had shown some interest in increasing pay for the auditors. Their pay has not been increased for a long time now. Rosemary said they now make minimum wage. Minimum wage went up this year from \$11.75 to \$12.55. Nat said he thinks they are deserving of more but if we think of them as providing a community service they are getting paid more than most people doing that kind of service. The budget includes money to be put into the audit reserve.

Brian budgeted for some additional services and consultants the Planning Commission will probably need to work on rewriting the town plan. He budgeted for a contribution of \$20K next year to the reappraisal fund. He increased the amount budgeted for legal expenses by a bit. We have two big upcoming legal expenses – union negotiations and the tax appeal from AG Self Storage.

We may want to budget for consulting services for the merger. Mike said he thinks we need to give people information about the merger at town meeting. There are things the public is not familiar with like the buyout for village employees if there is any change. If people are more informed hopefully they will drop the issue. Taxes would increase by about \$300 to \$400 per household with a merger. Eric said he doesn't see us hiring a merger consultant.

Nat said Johnson is a centrally located town with the potential to attract more people. Trailhead improvements will help with that. He asks that the town contribute \$5K for improvements to the Ted Alexander Welcome Center, with the rest to be contributed by fundraising. Mike said we said before that the project wouldn't cost the taxpayers any money. Now we are talking about contributing \$5K for phase two when we previously said there would be no cost. Nat said he thinks it would be money well spent given the amount of use both by Johnson residents and out of town people. Mike said he can't support it. Eric asked how much of the \$5K the Alexanders would be contributing. Nat said they have agreed to pay for the trompe l'oeil, which is \$3K. They might agree to do more. He is sure we can raise money from others as well. Eric asked, so the town would only need to pay \$2K of the \$5K? Nat said no, he is suggesting that out of the estimated \$20K cost for phase two the town contribute \$5K.

Eric asked if any ARPA funds would be available for the project. Brian said he would want to check with a consultant on that. The funds can be used for outdoor health. It has been

established that outdoor recreation has positive health outcomes so he thinks it could be used but he would want to confirm that before spending any ARPA money on the project. Eric suggested this might be an economic development tool to get people to come into town. Brian said he has attended some Friends of the Rail Trail meeting where people talk about the rail trail as an economic driver. But he doesn't think we can ever say that a dollar spent on the welcome center is worth a specific amount of business downtown.

Beth said she would like to budget for a contribution of \$5K and then look at the bottom line. Eric said he would support that. Eben said he would not. Eric said the initial estimate of the cost for that project was done pre-COVID and now construction materials have become more expensive. Mike said he doesn't think we can use COVID as an excuse. Nat said the taxpayers haven't spent a penny yet. It was agreed to add a town contribution of \$5K for now.

Brian said the EV charging station has not seen much more use recently. It does not get enough use to afford credit card processing fees. Eben asked, why not shut it off? Mike agreed. Brian said it doesn't cost us a lot and it does make us show up on some maps and searches. He has seen a few out of state plates at the charging station. It was agreed to reduce EV charging station revenue from \$750 to \$500.

Mike said if we are not going to do anything with the industrial park we probably should think about asking the voters whether they want to sell it. That is probably one of the biggest things people talk about to him. Beth said she also hears a lot about it. We should put a discussion of it on the agenda. Eric said ARPA money could potentially be used for some development there. Brian said VLCT has hired an ARPA consultant who we need to schedule to come to a meeting. Mike agreed that a dedicated meeting on the industrial park would be a good idea.

Brian said we joined Vermont Trails and Greenways a few years ago. This was a program that would theoretically help us promote the town. They haven't been active and haven't sent us a bill in a while. We have \$85 budgeted for that now. The board agreed to zero that amount out.

Brian budgeted for an increase over last year for election expenses. He also increased professional training. He wants to send more of our staff to professional training events. Lydia, Jason and Lisa are all interested in attending more training events. He likes to go to professional development events. It was agreed to increase that line item from \$3K to \$4K.

It was agreed to create a separate subsection in the budget for Holcomb House expenses.

Brian said we have been overbudgeting for janitorial services so he reduced the amount. He increased some building maintenance line items. We have been unable to secure anyone to work on the clock tower. He thinks probably we should put out an RFP and be prepared to spend a lot more money on it. Mike said we had talked about taking the clock out and displaying it downstairs in the municipal building and replacing it with an electric clock, which would be basically maintenance free.

For the light industrial park the principal payment is going up because it goes up each year and interest will go down. Brian budgeted \$43K for that.

The patrol budget is increasing by 3%. The increase in what they're spending is higher than that but they have other offsetting revenues so the towns are only seeing a 3% increase. Dispatch services increases by 3.4%. The fire department increase is 4.8%.

Brian showed a graph Beth had created showing the change in different budget categories over the last 5 years. Most had only a slight increase or decrease. Emergency services increased more steeply than any of the other categories.

Eric said the three towns that contract with LCSD formed a policing committee to explore options because of the rising cost. Eben asked how the committee is going. Nat said they were meeting pretty regularly over the summer. What he would like to explore for the future is getting away from contracted services with the sheriff and gradually moving into an intermunicipal agreement. One advantage would be continuity of service. Eric said another would be more control. Nat agreed. Our service would not be up to the whims of whoever is elected sheriff, who could decide not to contract with us anymore. Eric said we would be responsible for insurance, legal expenses, etc. that we don't see now. Nat said another big benefit is that we could provide a 30-year retirement plan if we were to set up our own municipal department. That would be more attractive. In 5 or 6 months we will have to re-sign our contract with the sheriff's department. It needs to be updated to show services and deliverables. VLCT will be able to help us with that.

Beth said one thing for us to consider is not having full coverage. She doesn't think that should be the decision of the selectboard but it is something our residents should consider. Nat said he thinks about the people who need help at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. Beth said there is already mutual aid out there. Nat said people will not get the same response time with mutual aid. Talk to people in Cambridge and Eden about their response times with a part-time State Police contract or no contract. It is dramatically different from ours. And yet, said Beth, they haven't changed what they are doing.

Beth said the trend line for emergency services stands out on her graph and it will spike up more. She noted that the amount is double the next lowest item in the chart. However the chart does not include highway department expenses. Nat said public safety is a core function of government and one of the main reasons government exists. It is reasonable that that is one of the highest cost line items.

Brian said the majority of the increase in the library budget is coming from their proposed increase in hours for the youth librarian. Stacey said the library's proposal would provide health insurance for a second employee. The youth services librarian position is very comparable in duties, skills and hours to the rec coordinator position, which does have prorated benefits based on the hours that person works. The youth services librarian is making less per hour than the rec coordinator with no benefits. The rec coordinator works 24 hours per week on average and the youth librarian works 23.75 hours per week, serving hundreds of children per week and continuing to provide services through COVID. Nat asked how

library usage has been. Stacey said it continues to go up all the time. The librarians continued to work through COVID, putting together activity and book packets. Now that the library has shut down in-person programs again Kristen has been doing programs online. Usage has not dropped off due to COVID. She asked the board to think about how that position compares to a very comparable position that is already receiving benefits pro-rated for the number of hours worked.

Stacey and Brian said the library did not budget for pro-rated insurance but for full insurance for the youth librarian. Brian said the library had not thought of the option of pro-rated benefits. Their board would have to vote on that. That is a suggestion we can make to them. Beth said pro-rating benefits would reduce their budget by about \$5K. Eric suggested decreasing the library budget by that amount and then the library board can discuss it. (*Stacey left at 9:47.*)

Brian said the skatepark committee has budgeted for a large increase in personnel costs. The reason for that is that lately the skatepark has experienced vandalism and nuisance elements and they want to increase the amount of time they have people at the skatepark who are reporting to us. They want to increase not only the hours but the level of professionalism. Brian would like to make the skatepark ambassador a position that reports to Lisa so she has direct oversight over those people. Beth said she does not love the idea of new people reporting to Lisa. Brian said the skatepark budget increase is \$1500. Eric asked if Beth supports the increased presence at the skatepark. Beth said she is neutral about that.

Given the late hour the board decided to schedule a special meeting at 4:00 on January 13 to continue budget review.

10. Executive Session to Discuss Union Negotiations

Eben moved that premature disclosure of our position would disadvantage the town in negotiations with the union, Nat seconded and the motion was passed.

Eben moved because of this that the board enter into executive session as allowed by 1 V.S.A. § 313(a)(1), Nat seconded and the motion was passed at 9:56. The board came out of executive session at 10:20.

11. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 10:20.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths