

JOHNSON SELECTBOARD MEETING MINUTES  
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING / REMOTE PARTICIPATION BY ZOOM  
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2022

**Present:**

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

Others: Brian Story, Rosemary Audibert, David Williams, Cynthia Hennard, Jasmine Yuris, Jeanne Engel, Mark Woodward, Kim Dunkley, Walter Pomroy, Jessica Bickford, Erica Coats, Dick Simays, Mark Nielsen, Kyle Nuse, Kyle Hill, Sally Hill, Kate Donnally, Lois Frey, Sabrina Rossi, Diane Lehouiller, Yvonne Martin, Jeff Bickford, Susan Tinker, Lynda Hill, 3 other community members

**Absent:** Eben Patch

Moderator David Williams called the meeting to order at 7:01.

Brian Story and David Williams explained how the meeting would be run. David noted that Mike Dunham and Nat Kinney are going to be leaving the selectboard. He thanked them for their work. Eric Osgood said the board wanted to have an in-person town meeting but opted not to for the health of the community. Eric congratulated Eben Patch and his family on his new baby boy. He thanked Mike and Nat for their contributions to the board. He offered condolences to the family and friends of former selectboard member Brad Reed, who recently passed away.

Eric said this year's town report is in memory of Carl Powden who represented Johnson in the legislature for 6 years and was a volunteer with various groups and a regular at town meeting. He offered condolences to Carl's family and friends. This year's town report has two dedications. One is to Anne Mullins, a longtime town employee who has retired, and the other is to David Williams. This is his 40<sup>th</sup> year as moderator. Eric has appreciated his wisdom at town meeting.

David Williams said he understands that the force behind Article 3 ("Shall the Town of Johnson withdraw from the Lamoille North Modified Unified Union School District?") was Walter Pomroy. He asked Walter to address Article 3. Walter said at the March 2020 town meeting voters passed a non-binding motion calling for a vote on withdrawing from Lamoille North Modified Unified Union School District #058A. A very important part of that motion was forgotten: the #058A. What the voters asked to be put forward is not what we are voting on this year. Johnson belongs to two districts 58A (the K-6 district) and 58B (the middle and high school district.) The voters in 2000 only asked to withdraw from the K-6 district. No one can tell Walter with certainty what we are voting on with this article. It could be interpreted multiple ways. He won't advocate one position or another because he doesn't know what this article will accomplish. He feels strongly that it is in the best interest of Johnson to leave district 58A. With Cambridge not joining the district, the tax burden has been shifted onto Johnson taxpayers. The elementary school budget of Cambridge, which did not merge, has increased only 1.3 cents over 6 years. The budget for District 58A has increased 17.27 cents over the same six years. They are doing something right in Cambridge that we are not doing in Lamoille North. He can point out some things such as teacher-administrator ratios, student-teacher ratios and the cost of the Hyde Park school. He feels if Cambridge is not going to join the district, Johnson needs to get out. But he doesn't know what the article before us will accomplish.

LNMUUSD school board chair Mark Nielsen said whether this article is voted positively or negatively it still has to go to the other towns in the district. He has talked to people from those towns who are on the school board with him and he feels the odds of Johnson being released by those towns are very bad. He looks at this vote as showing how the town feels. As a school board member he can't take a position on this. There is a growing consensus in town about starting a PTO group for the elementary school, which he thinks is a good idea. The town is very distant from the school board members. The State Board of Education is putting together legislation to make Act 46 tighter so it will be nearly impossible to leave a district. He is preparing a letter to send to them to ask why they can't push towns like Cambridge into districts if they are going to force others to join together. For Johnson to leave the district, the other towns in the district have to agree. If they don't, Johnson can't leave.

Jeff Bickford asked if Walter, Mark or anyone else has a sense of what savings we could realize by leaving the district. He served on the committee that looked at unification under Act 46 and he supported it. In general he supports the concept of fewer districts. He wishes we had phrased it that all towns were necessary to form the district. By wording it the way we did we still went forward when Cambridge voted not to join and that kept the numbers from working in our favor. But he is wondering what savings we could see if we left now.

Walter said he can't say specifically. Johnson's budget would not be paying for the Hyde Park bond. We would be able to decide how our money was spent. The Cambridge teacher to administrator ratio is 25 to 1. Johnson's is 18 to 1. What is Cambridge doing that we are not doing? He feels we should put our money in classrooms, not administrators. If we manage our house correctly there will be savings but he can't name a dollar figure.

Mark Woodward said he voted against Act 46 and he will be voting to leave. He is with Walter on this. He thinks we can do a better job. He thinks little schools are the hearts of our communities.

Cynthia Hennard said it sounds like the other towns wouldn't let us out of the district, but if Johnson does vote yes, would that somehow activate more energy to accomplish being able to leave the district in the future? Mark Nielsen said he thinks it might be appropriate to write a letter to the Board of Education and ask them to put in a grandfather clause before there is any new legislation. It might be helpful to let them know that Johnson is in the process of trying to leave and would like to be grandfathered if the State Board of Education would allow it.

Walter said he is not taking for granted that the other towns won't let us out. He thinks the people who want to go back to local control will be motivated voters. He thinks we have a good chance of winning approval from the other towns to leave.

Kim Dunkley said if we don't vote yes, we won't know. Voting yes opens up the possibility.

Rep. Kate Donnally said the House Committee on Education is trying to tighten things up with regard to Act 46. There were not clear avenues for towns or schools who decided they wanted to leave their district. Her understanding is that they would be creating a mechanism where towns

that wanted to leave would have to go before the state board and demonstrate to the board that they had the capacity to leave the unified district and cover special ed expenses, etc. In the current iteration of the bill, the board would not necessarily be able to say no but would offer a recommendation. She thinks that if the board did not recommend that the town leave the town could have another vote and the article would have to pass by a certain percentage in order to reaffirm the vote to leave. Then the town could leave. She noted that parents within the unified district have the ability to send their children to other schools in the district. Some Johnson children are going to Hyde Park, for example. If Johnson is going to leave, the town might want to create a plan for those who are not attending Johnson Elementary right now.

Beth Foy said the state taking the position that you have to show you can self support funding is concerning to her when we talk about equity. It provides an unfair advantage to richer communities. Johnson is one of the communities that was sold the idea of cost savings over five years from joining the unified district. Johnson never gained cost savings over that period. The other towns did. She thinks Johnson has suffered financially in joining the district.

David Williams said he has some concern over the legal significance of a yes or no vote. If the article passes, what does that mean? And if it doesn't, what does that mean? Brian Story said he is reluctant to weigh in on that, not being an attorney. The language in the article is the language that was given to the town by our attorney. But Walter raised a good point. With the A and B parts of the district it is more complicated than it first appeared. David suggested that before the next meeting the town get an opinion from its attorney on what it means if this article does or doesn't pass. If passing this article means that we pass out of both 58A and 58B he thinks we have a serious problem. Brian agreed that the town should consult its attorney.

Eric said Article 4 this is a standard article that is in the warning every year that lays out how taxes are collected. It is recommended that we have it in our warning every year. David asked, it reflects past practice? Eric said yes.

Eric reviewed the budget, highlighting notable changes. Total revenue (less property tax) is \$1,112,414. The estimated fund balance to reduce taxes is \$177,405. The amount to be raised by taxes is \$1,974,332, an increase of about 3.5%. Total revenue is \$3,264,152, an increase of about 6.2%, which is pretty much in line with inflation. Town office expense has a pretty large percentage increase (59.9%) but the dollar amount of the increase is small. Total general government expense has increased by about 5.2%, pretty much in line with inflation. The total proposed budget is \$3,264,152, an increase of 6.2%. This past year we had a fairly large increase in our PILOT payment so the amount budgeted for FY23 was increased.

This budget calls for \$37,405 to be put into the reappraisal fund. The assessors we had hired were doing a rolling reappraisal. They did about a quarter of the town each year and at the end of 4 years we had a townwide assessment completed. Those assessors opted not to renew their contract and the new assessors are not doing a rolling reappraisal, so we expect we will need to do a townwide reappraisal in the next few years. Listers contracted service expense went down because the assessors we have now are not doing as much work since they are not doing a rolling reappraisal.

Our schedule called for putting \$137K into the equipment capital reserve fund but we are putting in an extra \$20K. Otherwise a few years from now the fund would be a little lower than the board was comfortable with.

The actual 19-20 cash balance left over after the books were closed was about \$13K. The estimated FY21 and FY22 cash on hand balance is \$197,405. Of that, \$20K goes into the tax anticipation reserve fund, \$100K goes to reduce taxes, \$20K goes to the buildings and grounds reserve fund and \$37,405 goes into the reappraisal fund.

We were drawing down the reappraisal fund to pay for the rolling reappraisal and it has been depleted to about \$7K. We will have to build it back up because we will have to do a reappraisal. It will probably cost about \$200K. What drives it is the Common Level of Appraisal (CLA.) Last year our CLA was 99.25 and this year it is 96.15. That was a significant drop in one year, probably driven by the pandemic driving up the selling price of houses. When the CLA gets down to 80% the state forces us to do a townwide reappraisal. We are trying to get enough money in the reappraisal fund so we will have close to what we need to pay for the reappraisal when it comes.

We put \$20K into the tax anticipation reserve fund. We are authorized to have up to 10% of our budget in that fund. We need it because our budget year starts July 1 and we have some quarterly payments that are due then but we do not set our tax rate until after the beginning of the fiscal year and don't start collecting taxes until August. We need some operating cash to keep the town going until tax revenue comes in.

Walter said there are line items in this budget that ARPA would probably cover. Why not wait and let ARPA cover the cost next year? Why is the town being aggressive about doing these projects now? Eric said we will get a little over \$600K in ARPA funds. His understanding is that we will be eligible to spend all that money. There are different ways to do it. One suggestion that we have been provided is that it could even be used to supplement our operating budget. Then we would show a huge surplus at the end of the year and that money would have no strings attached and could be applied to different projects. As far as individual line items in our budget, the board budgeted as usual back in January because we didn't know a lot of the rules yet.

Walter said the voters voted to raise the budget to take care of covered bridges but he doesn't see much happening. He sees bridge money being put into a reserve fund and nothing much happening with bridges. Probably ARPA will pay for bridges and that money could be given back to the taxpayers. Eric said in this budget we are bringing in \$35K for Scribner Bridge. Brian said we applied for a grant for an engineering study for Scribner Bridge and we are very likely to receive it. We will be eligible for a wide range of grant funding to complete the structure. Eric said we are bringing in \$35K from the bridge reserve fund as revenue. It is coming from that reserve fund as the voters had wished.

Eric said Article 6 may come across as a little vague. That is by design. The selectboard has had discussions with the trustees about possibly establishing an economic development coordinator position like the one we used to have, but the selectboard is not sure if the village will come

through or not. They wanted to leave it open enough that the town could contract for some work because it would be hard for the town to hire an economic development coordinator on its own.

We probably can't expect to have another Lea. She brought in about \$15 million. Some of that was due to timing and community support but there is no disagreement that without her we would not have gotten that much. A lot of what she did was beyond grant writing. She got projects shelf ready so when a grant became available we were ready. We are still benefiting from that but the benefit is diminishing. We would like to try to get someone to get us back on that foundation. Right now there is more grant money available than Eric has ever seen. He thinks we are competitive. But going forward we may not be if we don't have someone to maintain that foundation. A lot is dependent on what the village does or doesn't do.

Kyle said she appreciates and supports this article. She thinks it is very important that we make this a priority for our town. She asked what Eric meant when he referred to the village coming through – putting a similar article on the warning for their village annual meeting and passing it? Eric said yes. Kyle asked if that would mean potentially a joint employee. Eric said he thinks both boards had the thought that the person would be the primary employee of either the town or village and would be contracted out to the other. Kyle asked what happens if the town votes to approve this and the village does not do the same. What does the selectboard anticipate doing? Eric said that would be for the next board to look at. The way the article is written, we feel it gives us flexibility to contract with someone or maybe use grant writers more. If the article was about hiring a coordinator and the village didn't come through the town wouldn't be able to afford to fill the position and wouldn't be able to do anything.

Kyle said she and village trustee Diane Lehouiller got an AARP grant for Legion Field. On February 26 there will be a downtown-wide scavenger hunt in collaboration with business and community partners, ending with a community skate and bake with live music, cookies, etc. at Legion Field

The meeting was adjourned at 8:15.

*Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths*