

JOHNSON SELECTBOARD
PUBLIC HEARING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 8, 2022

Selectboard members present: Beth Foy, Duncan Hastings, Eric Osgood, Eben Patch, Mark Woodward

Others present in person: Brian Story, Rosemary Audibert, Lisa Crews, Walter Pomroy, Margo Warden, Charlie Gallanter, Lois Frey, Kyle Nuse, Diane Lehouiller, Bob Hoag, Paul Warden, Casey Romero, Sue Lovering, one other person

Others present via Zoom: Steve Hatfield, Ken Tourangeau, Jennifer

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Beth called the meeting to order at 7:00.

2. Additions, Changes to Agenda

Beth said discussion about rescheduling the first meeting in July will be added at the end of the meeting.

3. Public Comments Regarding Use of ARPA Funds

Beth said this is a meeting to brainstorm about how to use ARPA funds. She asked Brian to talk about what ARPA funds are. Brian said ARPA is the American Rescue Plan Act. It provided funding for local municipalities. In Vermont the bulk of the money is going to towns. Villages also got some and the library was able to get some but the bulk is going to the town. The total the town will receive will be over \$600,000. Under the rules for using ARPA funds we could either use an extremely complex process or we could claim the funds as lost revenue, so the town would like to claim them as lost revenue, which makes their use virtually unrestricted. We have some time to decide how to use the funds. We have some ideas and we are also going to get ideas from the community. *(Bob Hoag and one other person arrived at 7:03.)* There will not be any follow-up funds so we want to think about projects that are transformative for the community and that would be a good use of one-time funds. *(Paul Warden arrived at 7:04.)*

Beth reviewed some suggestions from the Vermont League of Cities and Towns about using the funds. Their ARPA overview page says: *VLCT recommends you continue to take time to be thoughtful and strategic in planning how you will put this unprecedented funding to work in your community. Your decisions should prepare your community for the next disaster, position future generations for success, and, whenever possible, help grow your Grand List.* Beth read the spending suggestions they offer. She said one thing the board has definitely been thinking about is using ARPA funds as matching funds for other grant opportunities.

Mark noted that the list of board priorities that is being shown tonight is not necessarily the board's priorities for ARPA funds.

Duncan said the figure Brian mentioned is for the town only. The village is getting a separate allotment that he thinks is around \$450,000. Beth said the town is getting between \$600K and \$700K, right? Brian said yes.

Brian showed the priority list for time and activities that the selectboard had come up with.

Walter Pomroy brought up the existing Recreation Facilities Plan and Johnson Pathways Plan. He said he feels we need to concentrate our funding on recreation and livability of the village and town. These are also economic development tools. The recreation industry is big business in the state. Businesses are not moving to Vermont but remote workers are. Making the town more livable and a recreation hub is a goal we should work toward. There is more we can do with our parks. We can make Old Mill Park and the river park better places for recreation along the river. We have a fantastic new opportunity at the Power House Bridge. The ARPA funds are an opportunity to do everything we wanted to do with our parks. The Pathways Plan had a goal of connecting a lot of areas to make Johnson a walkable community. We can implement some of these goals. The trustees also need to be involved with things like Main Street crosswalks. We have a number of properties we are underutilizing for hiking, mountain biking, snowmobiles or ATVs, including the Gomo lot and the former Tatro land. A private owner has a lovely property right in the village full of mountain bike trails. We have the ability to use some of this money on trails. He would like to hire a full-time recreation manager and also use ARPA funds as matching funds for grants to build a lot of these things. He thinks we should make this a desirable, livable community to attract young families and other people. The Johnson Pathways Plan and the Recreation Facilities Plan are both on the town website. He mentioned some other plans that are already in existence.

Casey Romero asked if ARPA funds can be used to cover losses due to the impact of COVID. Beth said yes. Casey said the Skatepark Committee has documented COVID-related losses of about \$2000 to \$2500. There are budgets that are in the red because of COVID-related expenses. The losses are real.

Lois Frey said the Historical Society also has documented COVID-related losses. She suggested broadening this category into general support for volunteers, including better communication and a new web page.

Charlie Gallanter said Walter talked about new paths. We have existing paths – Class IV roads – that have not been worked on in a long time. There are roads that have recreation-related usage and have suffered abuse that has been unrepaired by the town, specifically Reservoir Road and Prospect Rock Road. A section of Prospect Rock Road gets destroyed in mud season by recreational users and there is a section that should be upgraded to Class III. We could use ARPA funds for that. There is a section of Class II road he feels could use paving – the “Schoolhouse Hill” section of Plot Road, which is almost always washboarded. (*Sue Lovering arrived at 7:18.*)

Lisa Crews suggested that a VOREC grant would be a good way to double the money. Her biggest dream is a rec center / senior center / library. A possible location is McClelland Hall, which is not currently being used by NVU. Beth said the state college system has been talking about selling buildings.

Kyle Nuse suggested adding a teen center to those ideas. Her daughter would like a safe, fun space to go after school and on weekends to socialize, learn new things and have safe conversations around things that are important to that age group. Kyle loves the idea of younger

and older people interacting. Her teen and her 6 year old also dream of a public pool. Lisa Crews suggested that helping to make the pool at the college warmer and more usable by the public is another possibility. Kyle said her in-laws live in a town of 600 that has an outdoor public pool which is a place for people to meet friends, take swim lessons, work as a lifeguard or have internships. The pool has a lot of ripple effects. Johnson has strengths in outdoor recreation but also the arts. She has a vision for a sculpture walk. She described where she envisions it. She thinks there is a lot of potential to work with the Vermont Studio Center around having public art be part of their vision. They could have art residencies where what the artists made would stay in Johnson as public art pieces. The Beautification Committee sees a need for a landscaper for the town. Newport has a greenhouse and a full-time person and a part-time person who just do landscaping. People go to Newport to see the flowers. She could see that also tying into NVU. We could work with them to provide internships. Another idea is a dog park. Communities that have dog parks attract people to visit. She goes to dog parks in other towns and while she is there she buys coffee and goes shopping. All of this ties into a marketing and branding plan. We are working against the tide. We need to not define ourselves as a drug capital or violent place. We need to brand ourselves as a beautiful recreation place.

Casey Romero said about \$20K would cover the town match for a grant for a feasibility study for a bridge across the Lamoille River to connect the rail trail, Old Mill Park and the skatepark. There is a state grant that could pay for the feasibility study.

Lois Frey said with regard to trails on town property, one thing we need and don't have is an ecologically informed management plan. That kind of plan would lay out the best areas for the activities she has heard mentioned. It would help us do the right thing in the right place.

Bob Hoag said we have about \$600K but he is hearing millions of dollars worth of ideas. He loves the trail idea to link the town together. Using ARPA funds as matching funds seems like a good idea.

Lisa said she also has some smaller price tag suggestions, like dugouts at Old Mill Park, a playground at the skatepark, including a basketball half court, and a side-by-side or small truck for the public works and rec departments and any town committees that need a vehicle.

Donna Griffiths said one thing that is really needed in town is indoor space that young kids can use in the winter, ideally a big space. Fairfax used to have a great weekly toddler gym. It would be wonderful to have something like that for little kids in Johnson.

Charlie Gallanter said the Planning Commission could use \$20K to pay a consultant to help with the state-mandated town plan rewrite.

Casey Romero said she would like to see development of the light industrial park. Bob Hoag said he feels the talc mill area would be easier to develop. Kyle Nuse said we already have a shelf-ready plan for the talc mill area – the Railroad Street Area Wide Plan.

Sue Lovering suggested using the money for arboretum development. She said there are not many more street trees needed in Johnson. The tree-related needs she sees are mainly at the arboretum. It needs a gravel road from the opening to the storage area.

Rosemary suggested digitization of land records and tax maps. She said we are close to the floodplain and if anything ever happened to the records it would prevent people from being able to do things like sell properties.

Kyle suggested a proper bike lane on Railroad Street. Lisa said that is part of the Pathways Plan.

Beth said she is curious to hear people's thoughts about housing and about other economic development ideas. Regarding livability, what attractions do we have to bring families to our community? Lisa said the school is having a lot of teacher turnover and young teachers can't find places to live here so they can't accept jobs. Kyle said the same is true for the Studio Center and NVU. NVU is frantically looking for housing for professors.

Casey asked if there is good recent data on how much vacant or derelict housing we have now. Brian said the Lamoille Housing Partnership and the Lamoille County Planning Commission did a relatively recent housing needs assessment but that was pre-pandemic and a lot has changed. Casey said she thinks it would benefit us to have an overview discussion about how much and what kind of housing is needed.

Bob Hoag said this would not cost a lot of money, but he thinks maybe people in Johnson should think about some kind of neighborhood watch. The police can only do so much. It is helpful to make people engaged in criminal activity uncomfortable. Beth said she previously heard some discussion about group funding for private security cameras.

Lois suggested Constant Contact as a way to send out information about what is going on in town. She knows of a community in Maine that uses this and sends out wonderful information about once a week with pictures. That would be a good chance for volunteer groups and town government to get information out to the public. She also suggested updating the equipment used for Zoom meetings so people at home can hear what is happening at meetings. It is often difficult for remote participants to hear what is said. She also suggests redoing the web page to make it something more interactive like Constant Contact. Beth said Constant Contact is only as good as the people behind it. She thinks if we invest in something like that we need to make sure we have the people behind it to support it.

Lisa said she thinks Rosemary and Brian would benefit from a part-time administrative assistant. They are here late, early and on weekends.

Bob suggested bonding for purchase of McClelland Hall. Lois said the college is not keeping the building because it needs a lot of work.

Charlie asked where we are with our community and economic development person. Beth said we have \$40K to spend on that. The board has pretty much concluded that we need to go with a contracted person. Brian is working on writing up an RFP that the board will review and put out soon. It is in the budget for the year starting July 1.

Paul Warden asked if the village revisited spending on community and economic development. Beth said to her knowledge they have not. Diane Lehouiller said she is thinking maybe we could use some ARPA money to hire someone to write grants and do economic development.

Charlie Gallanter said the town website needs tweaking. During the changeover from the old to the new website documents were lost. Beth said the current website was a temporary fix. Charlie suggested there could also be hardware upgrades. The server at the municipal building sometimes gets overloaded. Brian said our wireless network for devices gets easily overwhelmed. We run out of ways for people to connect and the connection gets slower.

Lisa suggested a paper cutter would be helpful.

Beth said the town will also do a public survey. We will ask for identifying information from respondents to try to make sure they are Johnson residents. We will compile all the responses and then the selectboard will filter out the less promising ideas. A community member asked how that will get out to every person in Johnson. Beth said it will be publicized on Front Porch Forum, Facebook and the email distribution list. Others suggested using the News & Citizen, mailing a notice with tax and utility bills, or having a stack at the post office. Brian said we can have paper copies at the town office. Beth said she thinks an ad in the paper is a good idea.

Kyle said the Vermont League of Cities and Towns highly recommended creating an ARPA advisory committee. Is that something the selectboard is thinking of or is the selectboard thinking of serving in that role? Beth said VLCT says that other towns have done that. They don't actually say they recommend it. The selectboard will take on that role in public meetings.

Paul Warden asked about the timeline for the survey. Beth asked Brian's thoughts on that. Brian said he doubts it will go out before July 1. He will be pretty tied up between now and the next selectboard meeting. Beth said she will work on it too. Paul said because they are going to be working on the town plan, the Planning Commission was also planning to do a survey. Maybe there is a way to work together on that. Beth said she will reach out to him about it.

Walter asked if the village trustees are going to have a similar meeting. Diane said the trustees have not discussed it.

Paul asked about the timeline for spending the ARPA money. Brian said he thinks it needs to be committed by 2025 and spent by 2026.

4. *Scheduling for First Meeting in July*

The first Monday in July is July 4, so the board agreed to schedule a meeting for July 6 at 6:30 instead.

5. *Adjourn*

The meeting was adjourned at 7:58.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths