

ANNUAL TOWN MEETING MINUTES

March 7, 2023

Moderator David Williams called the meeting to order at 9:10 a.m.

He reviewed the rules and procedures for the meeting and read the warning.

Article 3. To review the reports of the town officers and others as included in the Town Annual Report.

David William said he wanted to recognize Eric Osgood's 27 years of service to the town and village. Eric's leadership, particularly with regard to COVID, set a statewide standard for government transparency. There was a round of applause. Rosemary Audibert thanked Eric for the 24 years they worked together.

Beth Foy said this year's town report is dedicated to town historian Linda Jones. She thanked Linda for all she has done for the town and presented her with a copy of the town report.

Linda thanked everyone for the dedication. She said 20 years ago she remembers having a conversation with Eric Osgood where she asked him why Johnson did not have a historical society and he said, "Why don't you start one?" A few weeks later he told her the selectboard had created a town historian position and suggested that she come to the next selectboard meeting if she was interested. She did that. She thanked Eric for his encouragement. Over the next several years a small core of people worked hard to create a historical society which became official in November 2006.

Eric Nuse said he noticed in that in the town report there was no update on the town/village merger. Eben said right now the town is waiting for a joint meeting with the village trustees to discuss a quote for a merger plan. There have been some meetings to discuss the possible merger. Eric Nuse asked if the report is available for the public. Eben said the original report is public. A merger subcommittee also did a small report. The merger subcommittee meetings are public and minutes can be requested from Eben or from the town office.

Article 4. To establish the rates of compensation for the Town Officers.

Mike Dunham moved and Eric Nuse seconded that compensation be \$2,000 per year for the selectboard chair and \$1,500 per year for the other selectboard members.

Jon Gregg said David Williams and his wife Peggy spend winters in British Columbia and David flies back at his own expense to serve as town moderator. **Jon Gregg moved to amend the motion to add that the town will pay 50% of David Williams' cost to travel back to Johnson to serve as moderator. Mike Dunham seconded, offering the friendly amendment, which was accepted, that the amount the town will pay is not to exceed \$500. Charles Flaum suggested a friendly amendment, which was accepted, that the town will pay David Williams' travel expenses in full for transportation to facilitate town meeting.**

Kim Dunkley said she and her husband are on a fixed income. There are other people who may want to moderate who live in town. She is speaking for those who do not want to see their taxes go up.

Eric Nuse asked David Williams for an estimate of his travel expenses. David said it is very kind for the voters to consider this motion. His knowledge of this proposal arose about 15 minutes ago. He requested that the motion be withdrawn. **Jon and Mike withdrew the motion to amend.**

Jon said he thinks David's service to the town has been longer than anyone's. At his suggestion, there was a round of applause for David.

The motion was passed with Beth abstaining.

Article 5. Shall the voters authorize total fund expenditures for operating expenses of \$3,341,120.22, of which an estimated \$2,084,868.79 shall be raised by taxes and an estimated \$1,256,251.43 by non-tax revenues?

Beth Foy moved and Eric Osgood seconded to authorize total fund expenditures for operating expenses of \$3,341,120.22, of which an estimated \$2,084,868.79 shall be raised by taxes and an estimated \$1,256,251.43 by non-tax revenues.

Beth reviewed the budget, starting with revenues. The amount budgeted for PILOT payments from the state is \$30,000 less than the previous year. The board believes the revenue will be less than it was last year and wanted to budget accordingly. The budget includes \$27,000 in state highway grants. The prior year the amount was \$34,800. We are submitting grant applications and we wanted to be conservative about how much revenue we assume we will get. There is an increase in the amount we plan to pay into our highway reserve restricted fund. We have a reserve fund to pay for highway equipment so we don't have to take significant amounts of money out of our operating budget. The board increased the amount so we can be more strategic in accounting for known expenses we will have in the future. We are increasing the amount to be put into the building & equipment restricted fund because we know there are town buildings that need maintenance and repair. We reduced the amount going into the bridge reserve fund by \$20,000. We have done a lot of bridge work recently and received some FEMA funds and we don't think we need to continue to fund that particular account as highly. We have discussed Holcomb House rental income with the Historical Society and made some changes. There is a \$2,300 increase in skatepark grants. These are grants we feel pretty confident will be received for skatepark use. We increased Tuesday Night Live sponsorship revenue based on what we have seen historically. Total revenue is a 2.4% increase over the previous year.

Beth reviewed proposed expenses. There was an increase in office admin. salaries of \$12,835. That accounts for the fifth road crew member we were finally able to hire. Beth offered thanks to the road crew and there was a round of applause. There were increases for healthcare and other insurance. We are putting some additional money into the reappraisal fund. With the changes in housing prices over the last few years we will be required by statute to do a reappraisal. We don't have listers. We have been working on a joint contract with Hyde Park to share assessor services. Lister services was increased by \$10,000. This line item covers day-to-day work not associated with reappraisal. There is a reduction in line 169 (trailhead building grant.) We won't

have the same amount of money to spend on the trailhead building in FY24. Interest on loan payments is increasing because any time we buy new equipment our interest payments become higher. There is a 50% increase to building capital expense for FY24. We are adding \$15,000 for heating upgrades for the garage and lower storage building. The budget includes funds to address a request from the Historical Society for roof and porch repairs at the Holcomb House. Our loan payments for the light industrial park were completed in April so we no longer have that expense. Law enforcement has a 5% increase (\$25,555.) That is mostly for salary and benefits. There is an increase of \$6,570 for library salaries. The skatepark and bike track section has a total decrease of 80% (\$3200) in planned expenditure for personnel. The skatepark budget includes site improvements and an increase in public outreach. There is an increase of \$27,670 for highway salaries. There is a reduction in insurance cost for the highway department, probably due to who has selected insurance. There is an increase of \$5,000 for summer roads. That is primarily to account for increased cost of materials. There is also an increase for dust control for the same reason. There is a reduction in capital and construction project expenses. We have some Better Roads and state Grants-in-Aid expected.

Eric Nuse asked if the selectboard has done any planning with regard to the emerald ash borer problem. Beth said the road crew has a general directive to remove any ash trees along town rights of way as they are doing other work and as they have time and they are continuously doing that.

Discussion with legislators

Discussion on the article was paused to give the legislators who had just arrived an opportunity to speak.

Rep. Dan Noyes said he serves on the Human Services Committee. The governor has interviewed two people who would like to finish Kate Donnally's term following her resignation. He will make a decision after town meeting and then we will be back to having two representatives. One bill his committee has been working on is an update to Adult Protective Services. Updates were needed because there is a trend toward more in-home care rather than care in nursing homes and there was a need to look at how to deal with abuse of older or developmentally disabled adults in their homes. The governor just appointed someone to the Office of Child Advocate. That is a position that works with youth in state custody and ensures they have supports to transition successfully to adulthood. He has been working on a bill with Rep. Harrison that deals with how we tax Social Security. Last year the deduction for tax on Social Security was increased but due to inflation they are looking to increase it again and tie it to inflation in the future. Legislators have been hearing a lot about workforce issues. The Human Services Committee has been talking a lot about nursing home and residential care facilities and paying people wages sufficient to make them want to work in the field. A wage study was recently done. It would be expensive to bring the agencies back to a level where they can make ends meet. Legislators want to figure out a way to get agencies back up and not have workplace shortages.

Sen. Rich Westman said he thinks the town has been lucky to have Eric Osgood on the selectboard. He said his morning committee has been changed from Natural Resources to Agriculture. His afternoon committee is Appropriations. The overarching issue in state government is lack of workforce. It is an issue in the private sector but particularly in state

government. It colors every issue from childcare to climate change to prisons. In our prison system staff are working 12-hour days. Some are working 60 to 80 hours a week. We have 26,000 fewer people working now than we did just before COVID. Nine thousand of those are people who have retired. That means 26,000 fewer people are paying income taxes so revenues are dropping. We now only have places in childcare for 40% of children born. We need to open up more placements. The question is who we will get to do the work. The state economist estimates that in the next two to three years our revenues will drop significantly and we will not have money from the federal government to prop up the budget as we did during COVID.

Alan Beard asked about the overhaul of Route 15 from Johnson to Jeffersonville. Rep. Noyes said the state is supposed to pave 9 miles between Johnson and Jeffersonville this year. Alan asked if the contract has been let. Sen. Westman said he doesn't think so but he is not absolutely sure. Rep. Noyes said Cambridge to Belvidere is also on the schedule. Sen. Westman said bids are coming in extremely high and most contractors doing transportation work are having problems finding people to work.

Charlie Gallanter said Rep. Noyes talked about increasing the wages excluded from Social Security taxation. Have legislators also looked at increasing the ramp of \$10,000? This is an income sensitivity issue. It hasn't ever changed, but with inflation shouldn't that ramp be longer? At the rates proposed by Reps. Noyes and Harrison, he believes it should be \$15,000. Rep. Noyes said the bill he put in with Rep. Harrison does not address that, but there is an additional 8% for both single and married people and going forward it will be tied to inflation. But Charlie raises a good point. Charlie asked, the ramp is unchanged even though it should be increased by 8%? Dan said that is right. Charlie asked, you are not changing your bill? Rep. Noyes said he is not even sure Ways and Means will take it up.

Charlie said the staff of the Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets has increased dramatically over the last several years. Maybe they have too many employees for too much money. Sen. Westman said he thinks that is the smallest state agency. Part of the increase there came during COVID and it was all related to the food programs. He feels because that agency is so small it is not the first place to look at cutting state government positions.

Charles Flaum said a big issue is lack of rentals. Airbnbs have gone through the roof. His son and daughter-in-law decided not to come back to Vermont because rents are so high here. What are legislators going to do about the proliferation of Airbnbs that have taken rental properties off the market? Someone who works for him has been trying unsuccessfully for 2 years to find a closer place to rent. Unless more rental properties are available to young people they won't move into the state.

Sen. Westman said \$100 million state dollars have been put into the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board in the last year and a half. We have to be careful when talking about Airbnbs and not lump them all together. He has 19 long-term apartments. He also put \$16,000 into the farmhouse he grew up in and made it an Airbnb so he doesn't lose his family farm. Airbnbs are the fastest growing revenue source for the state budget. They pay rooms and meals tax and we need money in the budget to support housing. They could be policed a lot more. We do need to build more housing. The cost of housing has been driven

up dramatically during the pandemic. Support in the state budget is very important. The legislature just put another \$40 million into VHCB to support housing. These aren't easy issues and they won't be quickly dealt with.

Charles said it came out recently that 27% of housing purchases within the state are from out-of-staters. A lot of that is investment property. Is there any way to address that? We don't need out-of-staters purchasing properties and turning them into Airbnbs.

Rep. Noyes said housing is something legislators think about a lot in connection with workforce. They are thinking about to do rooms and meals tax around Airbnbs and having more go to affordable housing. He is looking at housing for senior citizens. We haven't put a lot of investment into housing for senior citizens in village centers. Housing prices have skyrocketed during the pandemic.

Bill Moore thanked Rep. Noyes. He said he knows he has a strong voice for those of us who are aging. And Sen. Westman has an appropriations mindset and is now sitting on the Agriculture Committee. He thinks he will be helpful to all of us. He thanked Sen. Westman for his vote against S.5 to slow that process down and make it more rational. He said H.89 created categories of legally protected healthcare services. Some of the additions to it are disturbing. It says contraceptive abortion and abortion are legally protected and it protects those engaging in or providing those services. It includes pharmaceutical and surgical services for gender transition and doesn't specify age. It will prevent parents from being involved in consent for their 14-year-old to get pharmaceutical and surgical transition services. Rep. Noyes supported a bill in the House that will by law cut parents out of the decisions and interactions with physicians to obtain surgical and pharmaceutical services for gender transition. Why did he sponsor that bill and does he have second thoughts now that he has seen some of the testimony? Rep. Noyes said he doesn't believe it cuts the parents out. He believes healthcare decisions should be between parents and physicians. Bill said the testimony was clear. There is no access for a parent who opposes that. That was testimony from people supporting the bill. He said it is even worse if Rep. Noyes voted for the bill and didn't understand what it said.

The legislators left and the budget discussion resumed.

Beth said we spent more than was budgeted in the past year for winter sand. The cost of sand has risen so we are increasing the amount budgeted by \$10,000. We are reducing the amount budgeted for bridges contracted services to \$15,000 based on need. The expenditures for large capital equipment will be net zero because the cost will be covered from reserve funds.

Susan Moore said Line 41 (misc. reimbursements) shows a budgeted amount of \$4,050 for FY22 and actual revenue of \$57,000. What accounts for the difference and why was it so much? Beth said a lot of that was for the trailhead building. This is revenue that we did not have another place for in the budget – money coming in from the family that sponsored the trailhead building.

Susan Moore said Line 206 under Office Expenses always has \$10,000 budgeted and \$10,000 actually spent. There should be a difference between what was budgeted and what was spent. And

now \$30,000 is proposed for that line. She works in a small office and they don't come close to spending \$10,000 a year. What is that for?

Eben Patch said that line (small equip. purchase – current year) is how our building reserve fund is funded. The line item is used for office expenses but any money left over goes into the reserve fund. Part of the increase to that line is because work is needed on the town garage heating system and on other buildings.

Brian Story said quite a few years ago the town voters voted to establish a buildings and grounds fund to stabilize building maintenance expenses and in that vote it was decided that unspent money from the office equipment line was how that would be funded. That is why it is always \$10,000. Another reason it is going up is because of plans to purchase a large format printer and scanner to digitize more records and provide them more easily to people who need to access them.

Bill Moore said he appreciates that the board put a little buffer in salaries. He would hope that it is enough. He thinks the workforce situation will get worse before it gets better. The amount budgeted for Class IV road labor is zero. We have some trails in town, aside from the VAST trail. Is maintenance being done on those by town employees or is it paid for mostly by state grants or VASA? How are the trails being maintained? And is there awareness of emerald ash borer, especially on Class IV roads and trails that are not being monitored?

Beth said the salary adjustments are based on increases that we know the cost of right now. She assumes he is referring to trails on town land. Bill said also Class IV roads that are not maintained and are used for recreation. Beth said we have volunteer committees and typically those groups account for much of the work done on trails. They can make a request to the board as part of their operating budget request. Regarding the emerald ash borer, she thinks the Conservation Commission and Tree Board are keeping an eye on the situation. Sometimes they come to the board with requests. Noel Dodge said the town road crew has been going after ash trees proactively. He doesn't think we really have information on ash trees on Class IV roads. They are not technically being maintained.

Michael Patch said he is seeing that trucks are going from Johnson to Eden and other places to get sand and gravel. Traveling for that material means additional liability and wear and tear. Are we looking for new pits so we won't have to spend money to get sand in other places? Eben said there are not many years left in the existing pit. The town has contacted Bert Nadeau about possibly getting an extension. Some board members have looked into possibilities for purchase elsewhere. Purchase of any property would have to go through the taxpayers. When town employees went to Eden, they wanted to go to Nadeau's but Nadeau's didn't have material at the time. And the sand they bought in Eden was cheaper so that paid for some of the extra hours and wear and tear on vehicles.

Michael Patch said originally the apartment building on the second floor of the Holcomb House was supposed to offset cost for the building. At one point it was said that the Historical Society wasn't going to cost taxpayers anything but the funds to get it started. He sees that we are not gaining money from the apartment and costs are going up. Duncan said there was a town vote that authorized the selectboard to purchase the Holcomb House for the Historical Society. Part of that authorization was the town taking out a 5-year note. As he remembers it, the discussion was that the

income from the rental of the two apartments would just about cover the cost of the loan payments. During the period when the loan was being paid off the Historical Society was raising money for purchase of the building. He believes they contributed 50% of the annual expense the town was incurring for the loan. The loan has been paid off. Now we are in a situation where income from those apartments is not needed to pay the loan costs. What the Historical Society is working on now and the selectboard is considering is allowing the Historical Society to expand upstairs and no longer renting out the upstairs apartment, so rental income would be from just one unit. It would take a significant investment of money to make the upstairs apartment rentable if we wanted to rent it out again. The Historical Society has been paying a contribution in lieu of rent. That contribution in their budget is intended to pay for the cost of utilities they use. That amount has been increased in this year's budget.

Michael Patch asked how the board sees the town helping the elderly as far as getting in and out of buildings, "out and about" facilities, etc. Does the selectboard have a vision for that?

Duncan said regarding the emerald ash borer, it is important to remember that trees in the town rights of way belong to the property owner so removing ash trees is a cooperative effort between the town and the landowner. The exception is if there is a danger tree. Then the town has a legal right to remove it.

Beth said in her personal view, the town's job is to make sure roads, sidewalks and town buildings are safe and accessible. Beyond that, the selectboard has a responsibility to work with agencies and committees and other entities outside of town government and help support them so they can provide services the town can't provide.

Beth said p. 29 of the town report shows estimated cash on hand balances. The balance at the end of FY21 was \$64,062. The estimated FY22 and FY23 cash on hand balance is \$213,393. Proposed reservations are \$125,000 to reduce taxes; 16,057 for the building and grounds fund; \$40,143 for the reappraisal fund; \$12,043 to the capital equipment fund and \$12,043 to the grant matching fund (contingent on the article establishing that fund being passed.) Total proposed reserve funding is \$205,287.

Beth said we need enough cash on hand to pay our quarter one bills beginning July 1, 2023. The expected total of those (\$392,912) is shown on p. 30.

P. 31 is about the tax rate. The percentage increase rounds up to 3.5%.

The capital equipment plan is our multi-year plan for budgeting and spending on equipment, primarily heavy equipment. Balances for each year of the plan are shown on p. 32. The balance at the beginning of each fiscal year shifts pretty significantly and in the future it goes down. The lowest expected number is \$11,474. Part of the reason for having cash available in reserves is to try to ensure we don't ever hit zero. That is part of the reason for the increase in funding of capital reserves.

The motion was passed by a voice vote.

Article 6. Shall the voters authorize the Town of Johnson to raise, appropriate, and expend up to \$50,000 for the purpose of hiring or contracting with an Economic Development professional?

Eric Nuse moved the article as printed, seconded by Paul Warden.

Beth said the selectboard worded this article slightly differently from last year's article because they wanted to be more clear on the possibility of hiring someone. We have \$600,000 in ARPA funds available to the town now. We are looking to grow and make sure the town is economically viable. We want to spend our money wisely. We are hoping having someone in an economic development role would help us do those things wisely. The town administrator has a lot of other work and that doesn't let us focus our efforts on economic development as we would like.

Kim Dunkley asked how much this job will take off the plates of the town administrator and village manager. Will it be reflected in their job titles and pay? Or is this a whole new position?

Beth said she can't speak to the village situation except to say that the village turned down a similar article last year at their annual meeting. She doesn't know what they have planned this year. The town administrator does do things related to grants but there is not sufficient time in daily operations to do it justice. We have not had enough focus on looking ahead because day-to-day operations are cumbersome.

Michael Patch asked if Johnson still belongs to the Lamoille County Planning Commission. Beth said yes. Michael said we are already funding LCPC in our taxes. Why do we need our own economic development position? Beth said we do use LCPC to help us with studies but they don't have a sufficient amount of time dedicated to Johnson. We believe we need someone dedicated to Johnson. Michael asked, this position will not continue year to year? Beth said this article allows us to put the position in the budget for FY24 and we will have to assess each year after that whether to continue it.

Diana Osborn said she doesn't see expanding into economic development as something that is necessarily the town's job. We don't even have basic infrastructure in place for people who live here. What are we doing bringing in an industrial park or other development when we don't even have basic internet for people in town? If this is a grant writer position, call it that. We are not in a position to develop our economy. We don't have places for people to live. Beth said we need a grant writer and grant administrator and if we are going to be strategic in moving forward with high speed internet, etc. we need someone who understands those things and guides us. She thinks it is appropriate as a town goal to be involved in infrastructure buildouts, which can mean internet or roads or access to water. She thinks we need to be well placed to do those things in addition to having someone account for grants.

Bill Moore said what he hears is that there are things that need to be done that exceed available staffing to do them. His recollection is that there is a deadline for ARPA funds. Beth said the funds need to be dedicated by the end of 2024 and spent by the end of 2026. Bill asked if that is part of this. Beth said yes. We need someone to help us with spending ARPA funds. Bill asked, the economic development person would in large part be leveraging those monies? Beth said in large part, yes.

Charlie Gallanter said last year the voters authorized spending \$40,000 on economic development. He believes the board advertised for contractors and he assumes the cost was higher than \$40,000, which begs the question whether \$50,000 is enough. Beth said that is a good question. It depends. We advertised for a contracted individual and for firms and the typical response we received gave hourly costs. It depends on how many hours we contract for. He is right that \$40,000 won't get us far but it will get us somewhere. It depends on who submits applications and their billing structure.

Eric Nuse said he knows often grants can pay for administrative costs. Can we do that with ARPA funds? Beth said her hope is that we can spend money to make money – use the economic development money to get someone in and then they can write grants to self fund so we don't have to spend ARPA funds. She would love to see the town using ARPA funds for grant matching. Fifty thousand dollars won't pay for someone to work for us full-time but hopefully it would be enough to get someone in the door who can work towards self-funding.

Brian Vandorn asked how the extra \$50,000 would be paid for. Beth said if this article is approved it will go into our operating budget. Brian asked if it will raise the budget from what was just approved. Beth said yes. Brian said as a taxpayer he can't support any increase in the budget. **Brian moved to amend the motion to read “Shall the voters authorize the Town of Johnson to appropriate, and expend up to \$50,000 from the ARPA fund for the purpose of hiring or contracting with an Economic Development professional? The motion was seconded.**

Bill Moore asked if the ARPA funds can be spent that way. His recollection is that there may be restrictions. Beth said the way the town accepted the money many strings were removed. We do have allowance to spend that way.

George Pearlman said the PILOT and current use revenue in the budget is half a million dollars. Is that really going to come in? Beth said to the best of our knowledge it will not change significantly in FY24. We have not been told otherwise. We have talked to our legislators about it.

Eric Nuse asked what the board's opinion is on the amendment. Eric Osgood said the board's intention was that this money would be raised by taxes. Years ago we had a part-time town administrator and a part-time economic development person, Lea Kilvadyova. She was very successful. During her 10 years working for the community in a joint town and village position she brought in about \$15 million to this community. Some of that probably would have come anyway but it is doubtful that we would have gotten that much. She looked for grant opportunities and got projects shelf ready so we could be competitive when grants became available. That is what this kind of position can offer the town. If we have this person they can get projects to a point where they are on the shelf just waiting for the right opportunity. Some administrative costs can be applied against grants to help cover costs of the employee. It will probably cost the town much less than \$50,000 because we will be getting reimbursed from grants. He would not support this motion. ARPA is one-time money that will not come again. If we have the right person who can use the ARPA funds to pull down more money from other grants there is a very good chance that millions of dollars could come into this community. He thinks this position is very important and should be permanent and paid for out of our taxes.

Mark said he thinks this ARPA money is a unique opportunity for us to do transformative spending. He doesn't think we should take the \$50,000 out of that when we will need to fund the position on a continuing basis. He hopes we can bring on someone who can use our ARPA money to pull down more money. He hopes the amendment will be defeated, that we can raise the \$50,000 out of taxes and that the position will continue and pay for itself. We are getting requests from Senator Welch's and Senator Sanders' offices to send proposals. Often there is a 5% or 10% match required.

Casey Romero said decisions don't have to be made on how to spend ARPA money until the end of 2024. There is a procedure in place to decide on how to use ARPA funds. This amendment would jump the line. Procedurally, she thinks it is a bad idea.

Geoff Corey asked what this person will be doing besides getting money. Will they investigate possible areas where we can see economic growth? Will they come up with ideas, not just grab a bunch of money? Beth said we need a plan. We need someone who will invest time into finding opportunities in town and building plans so we are well positioned to get big money if it is available.

Duncan said he agrees with what Eric and Mark said. They are right that this ARPA money is extraordinary. In 26 years in municipal government he never before saw an opportunity where federal funds could be used as a match for other federal grants. This money has that capability. If we take \$50,000 out of the ARPA funds to pay for this cost it might seem like a wise thing because it doesn't raise taxes but it takes \$50,000 out of what could otherwise match another grant. We could potentially leverage a lot more money using the ARPA money. Under the ARPA rules, the selectboard is the designated group to spend the ARPA money. If the voters' wish is that we spend it on this position the selectboard probably would, but it is ultimately the selectboard's decision

Scott Meyer moved to call the question and the motion was seconded and passed by a voice vote.

The amendment failed by a voice vote.

Eric Nuse said he is a little worried that \$50,000 won't do the job. The selectboard already tried last year with \$40,000 and got nowhere as far as he knows. Eric Osgood said that is a gamble we take. The cost of everything is going up. But he thinks \$50,000 would get us a long way. Some of the position cost would be covered by whatever grants the person could pull down and the selectboard would have the flexibility of choosing to use ARPA funds in addition if necessary.

Jon Gregg said he has the same concern. How did the selectboard come up with the figure of \$50,000? Beth said it costs a lot hourly to get someone who will do a good job, probably \$100 an hour or more. The selectboard didn't want to be greedy. We have \$40,000 in the current budget that we can use if we can get someone in to put us in a good position before the next fiscal year. This probably would not be a full-time position for a full year. If we needed to supplement because we were seeing good traction we would have the option to supplement the \$50,000. Jon asked, approving this now doesn't limit the selectboard to spending only \$50,000? Beth said that is correct.

Katie Orost asked if the village is putting a similar article on its warning as well. Rosemary said no. Katie said she agrees that \$50,000 won't get us much. She wonders why the selectboard made this a

separate article instead of including it in the overall budget. Beth said the article from last year wasn't written in a way that would allow us to write it into our budget. The way it is worded this year does allow that.

Charles Flaum asked how many hours a week Lea worked. Eric said 24. Charles asked if board members think Lea was responsible for at least \$5 million. Beth said she thinks the consensus is that she brought in more than that. Others agreed. Charles said that is \$100 for every dollar spent.

Jon asked if the town is advertising for a full-time position or a consultant at an hourly rate. Beth said they have been advertising for a contracted individual or firm with an option of employment if the opportunity presents itself.

Bill Moore moved to call the question, Michael Patch seconded and the motion was passed by a voice vote.

The original motion was passed by a voice vote.

The meeting was recessed for lunch from 11:35 to 12:46.

Article 7. Shall the Town vote to collect property taxes to the Town Treasurer in four equal installments (32 V.S.A. § 4792), as listed below; with delinquent taxes and assessments have charged against them an eight percent (8%) commission after the fourth installment (32 V.S.A. § 1674) and interest charges of one percent (1%) per month or fraction thereof, for the first three months; and thereafter one and one half percent (1 ½%) per month or fraction thereof from the due date of such tax? Such interest shall be imposed on a fraction of a month as if it were an entire month (32 V.S.A. § 5136). Payments are due in the hands of the Treasurer by 4:00 p.m. on the below due dates.

First installment to be paid on or before Thursday, August 10, 2023.

Second installment to be paid on or before Monday, November 13, 2023.

Third installment to be paid on or before Monday, February 12, 2024.

Fourth installment to be paid on or before Friday, May 10, 2024.

Martha Leonard moved the article as printed and the motion was seconded and passed by a voice vote.

Article 8. Shall the voters authorize the Town of Johnson to establish a Grant Match Reserve Fund for matching grant opportunities in accordance with 24 V.S.A. § 2804; to be funded annually by a dedicated line item, donations, bequests, and/or end of year surplus?

Martha Leonard moved the article as printed, seconded by Paul Warden.

Beth said this is a long-term reserve fund to allow the town to be better positioned in case we want to go for grants. The budget includes one line item that would put a little money into this fund if it is established.

Charlie Gallanter said in principle he agrees with the article, except for having the surplus automatically go into the fund. **Charlie Gallanter moved to amend the motion to read “to be funded annually by a dedicated line item, donations and/or bequests.”** Eric Nuse seconded. Charlie said we have no way of predicting what end of year surpluses will be. Currently they roll over into the next budget. It is not prudent to mandate that surpluses go into this fund.

Beth said this would not mandate that surplus funds go into the reserve fund. The board would still need to allocate the money. When we establish a reserve fund we have to specify the means by which money will be added to it. This allows end of year surplus to be used but it doesn't dictate using surplus funds.

Diana Osborn asked if we can put ARPA money in this reserve fund. Does that count as spending the ARPA money? Rosemary said she doesn't believe so. Beth said that question is being investigated in other towns.

Paul Warden suggested a friendly amendment changing the wording to read “to be funded annually by a dedicated line item, donations, bequests, and/or a portion of the end of year surplus.” Beth clarified that we need to specify where funds can come from for this reserve fund. This wording is not obligating that any source of funding must fund this, just saying which sources of money are allowed. Paul said he understands that is the intent, but he is trying to address Charlie's concern. Charlie asked, the town is not obligated to put all donations and bequests into this fund? Beth said if a donation comes in earmarked to go into that fund then we are obligated to put it there. Otherwise this is about potential sources. If you wrote a check and said it was for the grant match reserve fund we would be obligated to put it into that fund. **Charlie agreed to Paul's proposed wording.** He said all is a portion. The town could take all the surplus and put it into the reserve fund.

The amendment was passed by a standing vote.

Martha Leonard said the wording says the various forms of money can possibly go into this fund, not that they have to. If no bequests or donations come in other than what is in the budget line item, there won't be anything else in this fund? Beth said that is correct.

The amended motion was passed by a voice vote.

Article 9. Shall the voters authorize the Town of Johnson to establish an Arboretum Reserve Fund for the preservation, development and health of the Johnson Arboretum in accordance with 24 V.S.A. § 2804; to be funded annually by donations or bequests dedicated to the Arboretum and/or unspent funds budgeted to the Town of Johnson Tree Board?

The motion was moved and seconded as printed.

Beth said this article would allow establishment of a reserve fund for arboretum use. The allowed funding options are listed.

Bill Moore asked for more information about the arboretum. Brian Vandorn said the arboretum is on what used to be called Duba Field. It is a four or five acre spot. The selectboard gave the Tree Board use of the field and they have been using it since 2019. They have planted trees and shrubs. The Tree Board does a lot of work taking care of street trees and the arboretum. The arboretum is free and there is a walking trail by the Gihon along the back side of it. The Tree Board could use more funds in its annual budget. This article will help a lot. The Tree Board has received some grants.

Charlie Gallanter asked if the same logic applies to this – that either a portion of unspent funds could be allocated or all of it could be. Beth said it is the same logic and the same allowance, but there would be discussion about what amount actually goes in.

Tree Board chair Sue Lovering said the Tree Board has never had any unspent funds. This is the first year they have asked the selectboard for money for the arboretum. The selectboard allocated \$2,000 and the village allocated \$700. The Tree Board has worked hard to make the arboretum happen and it is beautiful. They have written a lot of grants. The reserve fund would be used if someone wanted to make a bequest or a donation. She doesn't see unspent funds going in there.

Brian Vandorn noted that the wording in this article refers to unspent funds budgeted to the Tree Board. The previous article didn't specify the source of unspent funds. This is more specific.

Duncan said the way the selectboard looks at transferring money from an unspent line item in the budget is to first of all determine if there is an overall surplus. If we were in a deficit he could not imagine voting for transferring unspent balance from anyone's line item.

Sue Lovering thanked Eric Osgood for all the support he has given the Tree Board. He has used his machine to dig holes for them.

The motion was passed by a voice vote.

Article 10. To transact any other business as may be properly brought before this Town Meeting.

Eric Osgood said he has served with a lot of really good selectboard members. He thinks the current board has great members. Mark is a former legislator. Duncan is a former town administrator. They bring a lot of experience and wisdom. Eben and Beth bring youth, new ideas and excitement. This is a great board. The town is in good hands. He thanked Rosemary for saying a few words previously. Those few words were more than she has ever spoken at town meeting in 27 years. He served as board chair for 23 years. He showed the first town report he presented to the town. It was dedicated to the municipal building, which had just been finished. It had 2 pages of budget. The current town report has 15 pages of budget. It had a budget of \$550,000. The current proposed budget is \$3,340,000. If you had asked him what being a leader meant when he was a kid he would have said it was a guy on his horse with a sword raised, leading troops into battle. Being a leader in Johnson has been more like being in the first car of a roller coaster. Being selectboard chair has taught him a lot about this community. Community members have always given him a lot of support and have been fair whenever the board has come with a request. He appreciates all the support over the last 27 years. There was a standing ovation for Eric.

Jackie Stanton moved to approve the following non-binding resolution:

We, the citizens and voters of Johnson, Vermont, oppose the recently announced changes to the Vermont State University libraries and athletic offerings, which are removing the majority of all physical collections from the libraries, elimination of library staff from the libraries, creating an all digital library, removing varsity sports from the Randolph campus and dissolving Johnson's affiliation with NCAA. We support and affirm the importance and necessity of these resources for all students and for the betterment of the greater Vermont community.

Bill Moore seconded.

Charlie Gallanter said the moderator had previously mentioned that we cannot have a negative resolution. This is negative because it says we oppose. David Williams said this resolution does not call upon us to do anything other than state a position. He rules that it is in order in its present form. He would probably rule differently if it were on the main agenda.

Bill Moore said he appreciates the sentiment. As long as this is a non-binding resolution he will vote in favor of it. We have to watch our backs and consider what we will do if the university is vacated in whole or in part. He would expect that to happen in the next decade. He understands that the state is looking for a children's detention facility as well as a women's prison.

Offie Wortham said he is a former professor at the college. He is totally in favor of the resolution. He doesn't know why it would be non-binding. David Williams said anything that involves money or resources has to be on the warning to be binding. Nothing done under other business is binding. If you want something that is binding you petition or get the selectboard to put it on the main warning.

The motion was passed by a voice vote.

Jen Burton said she would like to suggest that the town office open with a 2-hour delay on the day after town meeting or any other evening voting. People working in the office have long days when there is voting. They work late and then open the office at 7:30.

Jen Burton moved to approve the following resolution:

RESOLVED, that following town meeting and other general election days the town clerk's office open at 9:30 a.m. rather than 7:30 a.m.

Bill Moore seconded.

Molly Zapp said she likes this idea a lot but she wants to make sure this is what the staff wants. Beth said the town clerk is responsible for setting town office hours but the selectboard can have discussion with town employees about this. The support for people who work in the office is appreciated.

The motion was passed by a voice vote.

Diana Osborn moved that the town selectboard do a thorough evaluation of public safety to involve analysis of emergency medical service, police/sheriff and fire. Public safety is a full 25% of our budget. We give a lot of analysis to much smaller expenditures. She thinks this needs a more thorough investigation to look at how we spend the money, how it can better be spent and what our obligation is to spend that money. **The motion was seconded.**

Shayne Spence suggested a friendly amendment to add extreme weather preparedness. Diana said that is not part of our expenditures now. She was just looking at what we currently spend for public safety.

Bill Moore asked to hear from selectboard members about this concept. Beth said it is true that law enforcement and emergency spending is about 25% of our regular operating budget. There was a small committee that met to talk about sheriff patrol. We have a multi-town agreement on a shared contract. Johnson, Wolcott and Hyde Park contract with the sheriff's department and split costs. We have separate contracts for dispatch with the sheriff's department and for EMS through NEMS. Our fire department service is provided by the village fire department. In terms of a full audit, she can't speak to what the selectboard would vote to do. She would caution that we should be careful about all things we spend money on. She shares Diana's concern that it is a lot of money we spend. She thinks it is up to the board to discuss whether we want to put effort into a full audit and weigh that against other priorities.

The motion was passed by a standing vote.

Loran Marsan said she knows we have 3000 residents in Johnson and they are clearly not all here and able to vote. She wonders if the board has discussed other options for encouraging participation from people who are immunocompromised or have to work – people who she thinks would like to participate and can't.

Eric Osgood said that has been discussed many times. Some towns have moved their town meeting to evenings or Saturdays to see if they could get more participation. Towns that moved from the first Tuesday in March found that participation went down. You get more participation with Australian ballot voting but you don't have the opportunity to explain a particular article. With a town meeting format there is an opportunity to amend or change articles. During COVID the town mailed out Australian ballots to every resident in town and even with stamped return envelopes we got less than 40% participation.

Loran said 40% is significantly higher than the number of people here. She would like to suggest that the selectboard explore ways to increase voter participation. Not everyone has the privilege to show up here. Her spouse and her friend had to be at work today. She is not trying to have town meeting not happen but those who are here today are not representative of the entire community.

Offie Wortham said there are cities and towns that have 95% participation in voting. Even in this country some places have 80% or 90% participation. He would suggest doing research to find out how some places have increased participation.

Eric Osgood said it is ironic that this resolution to get more participation and the other resolutions introduced under other business could not have been introduced if we had Australian ballot voting. There are pluses or minuses either way. Everyone tries to figure out how to get more participation. If anyone has great ideas, we are all ears.

Beth said anyone could petition to move away from meeting on town meeting day. She personally likes town meeting day a lot. If there are ways we can support more people coming out she is confident the selectboard is open to hearing them. She noted that town meeting day is not a selectboard meeting. It is a meeting of the people.

David Williams asked how many voters were checked in today. The BCA members working at the check-in table said 104. David suggested that everyone who is in this room today could try to bring two friends or neighbors to the next town meeting. Marilyn Emery suggested asking someone out for lunch and bringing them to town meeting too.

Jasmine Yuris said she is thankful for the childcare. Otherwise she would not have been able to be here this long. In the past Roland and Gary Clark played music, which made it even more of a party, and there were flowers on the tables. The more we hype it up and make it a town celebration and a welcoming space for parents and residents, the more we put attention to it, the better turnout we will get.

Shayne Spence said he really loves town meeting day and having everyone here to go back and forth on articles, but there is a serious equity concern regarding who is and isn't able to show up. He had to take time off work to come here. Not everyone is privileged to be able to do so. His wife was not able to come because she is working. That is something we do have to think about. He does not think it would be worth getting rid of town meeting. But he thinks it is more than worth it to provide daycare and do other things that bring people in.

Bill Moore said when he was in college he worked with someone who studied hundreds of town meetings over the course of a decade. What he found was that the more meat is on the ballot, the more people will show up. He noted that 100% of the people who showed up today wanted to be here.

Eric Nuse said the selectboard is doing too good a job. If the selectboard were doing a worse job there would be a bigger crowd. He suggested perhaps we should petition our legislature to declare town meeting day a state holiday with pay and give people extra pay if they go to town meeting.

Adrienne Stevson said she just moved here almost a year ago. This is her first town meeting. She really likes it. She just joined the Planning Commission and would love to talk to anyone who has suggestions about what should be included in the town plan. She has been watching the news about the train derailment in Ohio and she is curious whether we have any protocols in place if anything like that happened here. If not, maybe we should.

Eric Osgood said for a number of years he has been the town's emergency management director. Every town has one. In an emergency the director assembles a team. They have identified all the known hazards in the town and have tried to identify what might be going through the town. The fire department has protocols for events like a hazardous waste truck that overturns. If anything like

that happens, with a phone call he can get Vermont Emergency Management to respond to our needs. The most common event we have here is flooding. We are pretty comfortable with how to react to that. We have done it many times. We have emergency plans in place.

David William said the first town meeting he attended in the 1970s was in the town gym and there were so many people you had to fight to get a seat. Election of officers was the main event and it was done from the floor. There were 14 nominations for selectboard and it took about two and a half hours of voting to narrow the field down to two people.

Duncan said he thinks Eric Nuse had a good idea about approaching legislators. He thinks under current law an employer can't restrict an employee from attending town meeting but they don't have to pay them. If they made it a state holiday that would help but he is not convinced it would lead to a radical increase in attendance.

Duncan Hastings moved to approve the following resolution:

This assembly acknowledges Eric Osgood's 27 years of service to the Town of Johnson and extends sincere appreciation for his service.

Bill Moore seconded and the motion was passed by a voice vote.

Eric Nuse moved to adjourn and the motion was seconded and passed by a voice vote at 1:58 p.m.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths