

JOHNSON VILLAGE TRUSTEE BOARD
ANNUAL VILLAGE MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
TUESDAY, APRIL 4, 2023

Present:

Trustees: Steve Hatfield, Lynda Hill, Diane Lehouiller, BJ Putvain, Ken Tourangeau

Others: Eric Osgood, Rosemary Audibert, Erik Bailey, Dan Copp, Nate Brigham, Susan Tinker, Lydia Putvain, Gordy Smith, Will Jennison, Arjay West, GiGi Beach, Dean Locke, Kyle Nuse, Martha Leonard, Scott Meyer, Kim Dunkley, Diane Lehouiller, about 6 other community members

Eric Osgood called the meeting to order at 7:32. He read the warning.

Article 2. Will the Village vote to adopt the Annual Report of the Auditors for the year ending December 31, 2022 as printed?

Scott Meyer moved to adopt the Annual Report of the Auditors for the year ending December 31, 2022 as printed and the motion was seconded.

Steve Hatfield said the village report is dedicated to Nate Brigham because he has given the village 25 years or more of service. One thing that stands out is that Nate has always said that the village comes first. There was a round of applause for Nate.

The motion was passed by a voice vote.

Article 3. Will the Village authorize its Trustees to appoint a Water and Light Commissioner? If not, to elect a Water & Light Commissioner for one year.

Will Jennison moved to authorize the trustees to appoint a Water & Light Commissioner and Martha Leonard seconded. The motion was passed by a voice vote.

Article 4. Will the Village authorize its Trustees to set the rate of compensation of its Officers and Employees?

Will Jennison moved and Martha Leonard seconded to authorize the trustees to set the rate of compensation of its Officers and Employees. The motion was passed by a voice vote.

Article 5. Will the Village vote a budget to meet the expenses and liabilities of the Village?

Ken Tourangeau moved and Martha Leonard seconded to authorize a budget of \$438,683 to meet the expenses and liabilities of the Village. The motion was passed by a voice vote.

Article 6. Shall the voters authorize the Village of Johnson to appoint the Village Clerk in accordance with 17 VS.A. § 2651e?

Martha Leonard moved to authorize the Village of Johnson to appoint the Village Clerk in accordance with 17 VS.A. § 2651e and the motion was seconded and passed by a voice vote.

Article 7. Shall the voters authorize the Village of Johnson to appoint the Village Treasurer in accordance with 17 V.S.A. § 2651f?

Will Jennison moved to authorize the Village of Johnson to appoint the Village Treasurer in accordance with 17 VS.A. § 2651f and the motion was seconded and passed by a voice vote.

Article 8. To do such other business as may properly be brought before this meeting.

Scott Meyer asked where the town and village are on the question of a possible merger.

Steve Hatfield said the initial expense would be pretty high and there are a lot of unknowns. Ken Tourangeau said during the beginning part of the discussion with the town on a merger the village didn't have a manager, which put the village at a disadvantage. BJ and Steve were on a merger committee. The town and village got some numbers and this will be a topic of discussion at the next joint selectboard/trustee board meeting. It is a deep subject. It will take time. The village is a year and a half behind because of not having a manager and is still working on moving forward. Diane Lehouiller said in May both boards will meet and discuss next steps.

Scott asked about the village garage. It looks like there are going to be more engineering studies and he heard about an energy audit on the building that needs to be demolished. How many more studies do we need? Why do an energy audit for a building that will be brought back to its frame?

Eric Osgood said if there is no objection he will allow department heads and the village manager to speak even though they are not voting residents of the village. There was no objection.

Erik Bailey said the short answer is grant money. The energy audit can help us get an energy grant. And we are working with Vermont Technical College students doing a capstone project. The Vermont State University president has a vision of community learning and we are working with students. That makes the president happy and he is the one who decides which campus stays or goes. That audit doesn't cost us anything. The energy grant we can get is up to \$500K with no match. It can be used for work on the building envelope. This is grant money that can help pay for the rebuild.

Ken Tourangeau said the first study was to look at whether or not it was feasible to keep the building on the current lot – to make sure the slab was not an issue causing moisture and that the nearby bank was not an issue. Erik Bailey said the garage project is on the front burner. He worked with the Lamoille County Planning Commission to apply to Sen. Sanders and Sen. Welch's offices for congressional spending for that project. It seems we are at least on the short list. This funding could provide up to \$750K.

Scott said he has heard about individual trustees reaching out for legal advice and saying they don't have to go through the chair and can work independently. He is concerned about legal fees. When he was a trustee he would never reach out to anyone on any issue without talking to the

chair, especially when racking up costs to the village. What is the plan moving ahead? Are trustees working through the chair or village manager or is it a free for all? He has been on other boards and board members have always worked through the chair. It seems like a free for all. If that is the situation, he asks as a ratepayer and taxpayer that it stop and that board members go through their chair. He feels there should be some process. Before a board member reaches out to an employee or lawyer they should check in with the chair.

Steve said his understanding is that no reasonable request from one of the trustees should be turned down by the chair. He believes the legal expenses the board has had have all been necessary or reasonable. Ken said when he sent emails he checked with the chair first.

Kim Dunkley said a lovely arboretum is manifesting in Johnson. She feels it will benefit the future of Johnson. She asks that the trustees think about ways to support it, possibly through labor. There is a need to get water to the trees. Tree Board volunteers have been hauling buckets. The Tree Board also waters and prunes trees on Main Street. If not for them, taxpayer money would be needed to pay for that.

Steve said Duncan Hastings, Erik Bailey and Nate Brigham recently had a meeting at the arboretum. There are some issues that have to be resolved. It is being talked about. We are trying to find the most economical way to get water there.

Kyle Nuse said with the completion of the rail trail this year she is asking what the trustees are doing to actively prepare for what hopefully will be an influx of people or to draw people off the trail into the village or from the village to the trail. That leads to a question around sidewalks. Sidewalks are valuable infrastructure for the village and they will be even more valuable for people coming off the rail trail to safely get to the village. She feels sidewalks have historically been a bit underfunded in the village budget. She is wondering about funding and the schedule for repairs. The Railroad Street sidewalk is starting to see wear and tear and pooling of water in some spots.

Steve said next Monday's trustee board meeting will include discussion on expenditure of ARPA funds and priorities. Kyle can bring this up then. He thinks on the survey about use of ARPA funds sidewalks were one of the high priorities.

Will Jennison asked, sidewalks are a high priority for ARPA funding and not the village garage? Steve said he believes the garage is pretty much at the top of the list. Erik said sidewalks were high on the popularity list among people who took the survey. Rob Moore of LCPC explained to the trustee board how different pots of money are available for things like sidewalks but there are limited places to find funds for the garage. LCPC is trying to encourage us to use ARPA funds for the water and light garage.

Will said the village matched the amount of funding the town contributed for the previous merger study. Village residents are all town taxpayers, so they paid for the village's half and also the town's half. Have board members read the previous study? Now there is talk of another study. Why is it needed? And why are village residents paying twice for it?

Steve said the board hasn't voted on paying for another study. BJ said the selectboard wanted to do another study and they asked if the trustees would give them the okay. They came back with information about the fee and that will be discussed at the joint meeting. They want the village to pay half. Ken said what they are talking about now is not a study. It is a process to start the merger plan. The consultant needed the village to say we would be vested in it in order to agree to do it. A plan would be developed for what the merger would be like and what it would cost each party. He doesn't think it is the final plan, just the start of the process. (*Lisa Crews arrived at 7:59.*)

Will asked, the town wants to start the process of actually merging? Have the trustees decided on a merger? Has there been a consensus of village voters on whether to move forward?

Steve said no; the village voters would decide. The studies have been vague. He thinks that is why the town wants a new study, to get more accurate figures.

Will asked, is it a study or is the first step toward merging?

BJ said the merger committee came up with some figures. For instance, if town and village merged, town taxpayers would end up paying about 8% more. This plan is to dive into that more and have a professional give us more accurate numbers so we can determine whether to move forward with this.

Kim Dunkley asked if the boards are trying to get a proposal to bring to voters.

BJ said yes. The merger committee came up with some numbers. This would provide more hard numbers, taking more into consideration than the committee did. We would get more actual data so voters can vote on whether to move further with this or not.

Gordy Smith said a few years ago when the selectboard and trustees agreed to hire a consultant he thinks the village paid half. He doesn't think the village currently has anything budgeted toward what the selectboard is talking about.

Ken said he doesn't believe it is happening in this budget. He agrees that the village should not pay half. He doesn't think there has been a commitment by this board to pay half.

Will Jennison said he is against village taxpayers paying twice for a study that affects town and village. The water, sewer and electric utilities are separate entities that will be affected. Those numbers have to be factored in. There are people on the selectboard who would love to sell the utilities. That would be a major disservice to the village.

Ken suggested that if people who are here tonight come to the joint meeting with the selectboard they can provide information board members may not have. Erik said the joint meeting will be on May 3.

Kyle thanked Diane Lehouiller for her service on the trustee board. She led with integrity, smarts and grace. There was a round of applause for Diane.

Lisa Crews said the auditors' statement in the annual village report uses the word "we" but there is only one auditor. And there has been no money in the auditor line item for the last 3 years. Were the village accounts actually examined by an auditor as the statement indicates?

Rosemary said the auditor came in on a few days and got paid for it. Lisa said she thinks we need more auditors.

Lisa said she sees Anne Crocket was hired as an estimating and logistics specialist. In the past when a new position was filled it normally came to the voters. How did this come about and what does Anne do? Erik Bailey said the previous electric foreman was more of an electric superintendent. He balanced between leading the crew and doing estimating, engineering and logistics work. Erik understands that it was hard to balance those things and spend time in the field. We had been contracting with the former foreman to do that work while Nate picked up operational leadership. It didn't make sense to contract for outside services when we could hire someone to do that work and other things to benefit the village. Estimating and logistics specialist is a part-time position. We were lucky to get someone who is an electrical engineer with 3 decades of distribution experience. She is overqualified for the job. She can also work on our GIS and asset management programs.

Lisa asked, so Anne is a replacement for part of what Troy was doing? Erik said yes. With the new model of the foreman being fully operational, the salary line item is only 1.4% higher than it was the last time the village had a village manager and foreman. And there have been significant cost of living increases since then so salary is really lower. And he thinks the current arrangement is more flexible.

Scott said there is legislation that is pushing electricity for heating, cars, etc. Are we ready for it as a village? Erik said we aren't ready as a state. He and other utility managers in the state are trying to talk to political leaders about problems with the legislation but with the current political leaders it mostly falls on deaf ears. If we keep adding to load we are increasing the risk of not having enough electricity.

Lisa asked about the miscellaneous revenue line item in the wastewater budget. Revenue in 2022 was much less than budgeted. Why? Dan and Rosemary explained that we had planned to take money from reserves to help pay for a cupola project but we did not do that project.

Will Jennison moved to adjourn, the motion was seconded and passed and the meeting was adjourned at 8:13.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths