

JOHNSON VILLAGE TRUSTEE BOARD MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
MONDAY, JANUARY 13, 2025

Present:

Trustees: Steve Hatfield, Will Jennison, BJ Putvain, Ken Tourangeau, Darrell Wescom

Others: Erik Bailey, Rosemary Audibert, Arjay West, Gidget Dolan-Dodge, Josh Pepin (the Tech Group)

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. *Call to Order*

Ken called the meeting to order at 6:00.

2. *The Pledge of Allegiance*

The Pledge was recited.

3. *Review of Agenda and Any Adjustments, Changes and Additions*

No changes to the agenda were needed.

4. *Review and Approve Minutes of Trustee Meetings*

It was moved and seconded to approve the minutes of December 9, 2024 and the motion was passed.

5. *Fire Department Report and Any Action Items*

Fire Chief Arjay West read his report:

Johnson Fire Department Report

Nov. 30 – Dec. 26, 2024

JFD responded to 8 calls. 5 calls occurred during the daytime (6 am - 6 pm) and 3 calls occurred during the nighttime (6 pm - 6 am.) The average duration was: 63 minutes

Nature:

Those calls were: 1 – vehicle crashes, 2 – automatic alarm, 1 – fire alarm, 2 – CO alarm, 1 – odor investigation, and 1 – public assist

Staff:

The average number of firefighters that responded was: 10

Total hours of service was: 64

The fire department board worked on the 2025 budget and discussed it with the village manager.

6. *Johnson Fire Department Budget Presentation and Approval Vote*

Arjay said the fire department ended last year with a small surplus, probably because it was an average year in terms of calls. There were 115 calls. The highest number of calls in recent years was 189. Last year they had a little less billable time and less cost for running equipment. A downtick in expenses is often followed by an uptick. Next year they are expecting the burden to rise a little and they want to be prepared. It is important to the fire department not to compromise on funding their capital plans. Some annual growth in the contribution to each plan is planned. The Vermont minimum wage went to \$14.01. The current base rate for firefighters is \$14/hr. Historically the board has tried to set the base rate at 50 cents above minimum wage. Part of the fire department request is a 50 cent increase to the base wage to bring it to \$14.50. Some water rescue rope needs to be replaced so the low angle rescue budget was increased. The cost of increasing pay by 50 cents per hour is \$1000-1200. They added \$500 to the labor costs in the budget. The budget can absorb the rest of the increase.

The cost of heating and fuels was decreased. The total proposed budget is \$196,893. The increase is \$4,689 (2.44%).

The 3 contract towns (Johnson, Waterville and Belvidere) and the village could all share the increase equally. If the village wants a zero percent increase, the 3 contract towns would have a 3.33% increase. The Town of Johnson increase would be \$3400. Another option would be for the village to have a 0.9% increase with a 3% increase for each of the contract towns.

Will asked if, given the rate of increase in costs over the last couple years, the fire department is confident that the proposed increase will cover expenses. Gidget Dolan-Dodge said she thinks so. She thinks the proposed budget amount is a good compromise that is safe.

Will asked, the fire department will not be able to replace all the ropes that need to be replaced in one year? Arjay said no. Will asked how long it is expected to take. Arjay said this budget includes about \$1000 to deal with one of the identified pieces. There may also be some year-end surplus that can be used. The total cost of replacement will be just under \$10K. Replacing all the ropes in 2 years would be very aggressive. Replacement may need to be spread over 3 years. Will asked if that seems safe given the life expectancy of the rope. Gidget said yes, because the high lines, which are most important, are the ones being replaced now. Those control and take all the weight of the boat. Will asked, the lower ropes are under less pressure? Gidget said yes.

Ken asked if the ropes are their own line item in the budget or are part of water rescue. Arjay said they are inventory that is within water rescue. The ones being replaced first are the most important one with the most stress and strain. Ken suggested maybe the fire department should have a timeline plan for rope replacement and prioritize it more. Arjay said it has come to light as a priority. The fire department has been diminishing the low angle water rescue line item to take care of other things. Now it is time to increase it. He thinks the large capital savings plan is another priority. Ken suggested checking expiration dates of equipment and planning for replacement.

Will moved and BJ seconded to approve a 2025 fire department budget of \$197,393 to include \$500 to start a water rescue capital equipment fund, with the village increase in cost at zero and the balance of the cost increase distributed proportionally across the towns of Johnson, Waterville and Belvidere. Will pointed out that his motion added \$500 to the proposed budget. Arjay said he thinks the best way to accomplish what Will intended would be to add the low angle ropes as an individual item within the small tools capital equipment fund and to add the money to that fund. **Will and BJ agreed to amend the motion to state that the additional \$500 is to go towards a line item for water rescue within the small equipment fund. The motion was passed.**

BJ moved to increase firefighter pay by 50 cents per hour, Steve seconded and the motion was passed with Will abstaining because he is a firefighter.

7. ***Potential Use of Vermont Local Economic Impact Grant Funds for Repairs to Fire Station***

Ken said the fire department building was built in 2005 and has not been painted since then besides touch-ups. It is due. It is not really in fire department budget to maintain the building. This grant was intended to be used to make an economic impact on the community in the way the trustees and Eric decide is best. Using it for the fire department would have an economic impact on the town and village of Johnson as well as the towns of Waterville and Belvidere. He would like to ask the board to set aside \$50K out of that grant for paint and rot repair at the fire station over the next year and a half or so. It will cost at least \$30K to paint it. There is caulking to be done that will take about a week. He

could see rot repair being under \$10K unless there is damage to the sheathing. There is a part of the roof that was temporarily repaired after it blew off but it has not been professionally repaired. He thinks \$50K is close to the needed cost.

Will asked if the fire department has any concerns besides what Ken mentioned. Arjay said there is some interior drywall work needed. That may be able to be done in smaller projects.

Ken said rain gutters could be used in spots on that building.

Will moved and BJ seconded to set aside \$50,000 from the Vermont Local Economic Impact Grant for repairs to the Johnson Fire Department building. Darrell asked, what if the quote comes in at more than \$50K? Ken said we would have to prioritize. Darrell said he has some concerns about ice if rain gutters are put up. Ken said he is just thinking of adding them in one area. **The motion was passed.** (*Gidget and Arjay left at 8:34.*)

8. ***Treasurer's Report: Review & Approve Bills and Warrants / Budget Status Report / Action Items***
Rosemary said the electric department is at 97.68% of budget for total sales for the year. We have not received our final power purchase bill for December yet.

Ken said he thinks we should have the town pay half the deductible for the lower storage building. We insure the lower storage building and they insure the municipal building. He thinks we should each pay half of each deductible. He asked Eric to talk to the town about it.

Rosemary said last week she, Susan and Marla did training on W2s and this week they will train on retirement remittance. Susan is writing up procedures on W2s. BJ asked if training on closing out the year has happened. Rosemary said we have not closed out the year yet.

Erik said this past Saturday the volunteer who fills and maintains the skating rink on Legion Field accessed a fire hydrant instead of using the frost-free maintenance hydrant specified for that use. About 120,000 gallons of water was used. A wall of the rink must have collapsed when he was not there and water spilled out. He has not talked to the volunteer yet but he sent an email to him, the selectboard and village trustee chairs and vice chairs and the town manager saying that no one is to touch a fire hydrant for any reason and the next time this happens our ordinance will be enforced in full and he will be fined. With Nate's help, Eric calculated the cost of the water loss and personnel time and invoiced the town for over \$1700. Nate was already in at the time and Jeff came in. Our ordinance says that only a firefighter under the direction of a Johnson fire officer or a Village of Johnson utilities crew member may access a Johnson fire hydrant. Ken said the volunteer has been told in the past not to use fire hydrants. Erik said he might even talk to the sheriff's department about a theft of services charge if it happens again.

Ken said he spoke to selectboard chair Eben Patch. The town did not direct the volunteer to do it. He is not part of any town board. Eben will be looking into this more. Ken would like Erik to send the volunteer a certified letter signed by the board of trustees telling him we will take legal action if he touches fire hydrants again. He is sure the trustees all want the skating rink there. In the past the fire department used to fill it. He would like Erik to have a conversation with the fire department about restarting that and research why it was stopped. Will said firefighters did it on a volunteer basis. He is not sure if they have the manpower to do it now.

Will said if the volunteer's actions were not directed by the town the bill needs to go to him. He was told before not to use a hydrant. He feels he should be fined \$100 now. Ken said Erik already told him he was only getting a warning in an email Ken authorized. He thinks the certified letter should say we are waiving the fine this time. BJ said if the town separates itself from the action, the \$1700 bill should go to the volunteer. Steve asked if there is any written record of what the volunteer was told previously. Ken said that would be in the minutes. Will said he was physically present and he was told not to touch the hydrants and that it was in our ordinance. The board agreed that the bill should be sent to the volunteer if the town does not want to pay it. Erik will send a certified letter as discussed.

9. Village Manager's Report and Action Items

Erik read his report:

The Vermont Public Power Supply Authority came and did an article and photo shoot highlighting Marla's NEPPA Customer Service Award. The verbiage of that article is next in this packet and can be seen on the vppsa.org website.

The Water & Light crew and equipment billing rates were brought up to current. The old and new rate sheets are attached.

FEMA came out to do a site visit of the DR4810 project at the utility pole behind Union Bank. They took input, pictures and measurements, that project is being processed.

The W&L garage project is churning forward. We have weekly meetings on it, and it remains on schedule. Nate just ordered 1 purchase & 3 rental storage containers to put parts and such in while they are out of the garage. The purchased one will continue to store necessary items that do not need to be heated, and can remove clutter from the facility.

The Draft RFP will be sent to me next Tuesday & we will have a week to provide comments or adjustments. I am suggesting a review group of Nate, Alec Jones from LCPC, Ken and myself all review it independently and meet on Thursday the 23rd to consolidate any changes we wish to make.

Budget work dominates my time currently. I met with Chief West & Gidget Dolan-Dodge on the JFD budget that they presented tonight. Other budgets are in early stages of development. LCPC is seeking a volunteer to serve as a Village Trustee Liaison to the Johnson Visioning Project funded through VNRC's Small Grants for Small Growth. LCPC, who is providing grant and project management services to the Village, is in the process of pulling together a core group of local officials to assist with structure, process, and logistics. These individuals would attend 3-4 critical check-in meetings. Ideally, the group would include a Selectboard Liaison, Board of Trustees Liaison, Planning Commission Liaison, and the Community Economic Development Coordinator. Would the board like to discuss interest, and if it pleases, appoint a trustee as the Village Trustee Liaison to the Johnson Visioning Project?

It was agreed to appoint BJ as liaison to the Johnson Visioning Project.

BJ said we had talked about trying to update the employee handbook. Have we gotten anywhere with that? Erik said he did some of that work a while ago. Currently he is working on the budget.

10. Potential Appointment of Village Manager as Designated Complaint Recipient for Alleged Violation of Municipal Code of Ethics

It was agreed to table action on this until Erik can clarify the requirements.

11. Website/Email Update

BJ said he has been working with the web designer on the website for about a month. It is probably about 10% done.

BJ said the town and village currently pay the Tech Group \$9,794 annually for our email addresses. The village monthly portion of the cost is \$816. If we want our own email package separate from the town, there will be a one-time fee of \$7,875 and we will pay \$1700 a month. We can continue to share with the village while also changing to villageofjohnson email addresses. That would be cheaper. Erik said it will be a seamless transition. Emails to the old and new addresses will both come to the same inbox. We can share an internet and security package with the town and just pay \$1225 to get village email addresses.

BJ moved to spend \$1225 to get village email addresses from the Tech Group, while continuing to share an internet and security package with the town, Steve seconded and the motion was passed with Will opposed. Will said he does not think the \$1225 cost is justified.

12. Discuss Salt Use Reduction and Review Village Sidewalk Maintenance Policy

Ken asked Erik to explain the salt reduction policy the board decided on last year to Darrell. Erik said the gist of it is that employees don't have to come in on overtime if there is less than 4 inches of snow. Darrell said he not sure what the liability is for sidewalks for municipalities. Erik said municipalities are very liability-shielded. Ken said we have left it up to the judgment of the employees to determine when sidewalks need to be cleared and they have done a good job. BJ said Nate likes the policy. It is not set in stone. Employees can take it upon themselves to do what they feel is right. Will said in his opinion Nate's judgment calls have been reasonable.

BJ brought up previous discussions about possibly getting our own sand. Ken said we buy our own sand and we trade with the town for salt. This winter's salt is taken care of, but he understands that starting this summer there will be no more trades and that the village will build its own salt shed with material taken from our garage. Will asked, the town and village will have separate salt sheds? Is that the path we want to head down? Ken said the town wants us to have our own salt. They feel the trades have not been to their advantage. Nate says we use a tandem load of salt and Jason says we use two. We brushed and cut for the town in several locations as a trade for this year. Will said if the town has an issue with the barter system he thinks it would be reasonable to keep track of the buckets of salt we take and write them a check, as opposed to building a separate salt shed. Ken suggested that Erik talk to Tom and see if an agreement can be reached with the town on salt.

13. Executive Session

Will moved to enter executive session as allowed by 1 V.S.A. § 313(a)(2) for the negotiating or securing of real estate purchase or lease options, with the trustees and Erik remaining, BJ seconded and the motion was passed at 7:34. The board came out of executive session at 7:53. No action was taken.

14. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 7:54.