

JOHNSON SELECTBOARD / VILLAGE TRUSTEE BOARD
JOINT MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
MONDAY, MARCH 24, 2025

Present:

Selectboard members: Mike Dunham, Peter Hammond, Adrienne Parker, Eben Patch

Trustee board members: Steve Hatfield, Will Jennison, BJ Putvain (remote), Ken Tourangeau, Darrell Wescom

Others: Erik Bailey, Tom Galinat, Seth Jensen, Melissa Manka, Diana Osborn, Eric Schultz, Paul Warden, Brian Raulinaitis

Absent: Duncan Hastings

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. *Call to Order – Village Trustees*

Ken called the trustees to order at 6:00.

2. *Pledge of Allegiance*

The Pledge was recited.

3. *Call to Order – Selectboard*

Eben called the selectboard to order at 6:00.

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

Mike asked to add discussion on the skating rink. Adrienne asked to add discussion of letters of support for a CDS funding application.

5. *Members of the Public*

No members of the public wished to comment.

6. *Approval for LCPC Plans for HMGP Grant Applications*

Seth Jensen of the Lamoille County Planning Commission said LCPC is seeking approval to submit two Hazard Mitigation Grant applications. The deadline is April 30. Last summer LCPC and the boards discussed possible grant applications. There are two projects LCPC feels it makes sense to submit applications for because they are ready enough and they fit the priorities Vermont Emergency Management has outlined. They will seek other funding sources for some of the other projects. One of the applications would be for floodplain restoration work on town-owned property on Wescom Road near the mobile home park. The other would be to look at potential floodplain restoration on potential buyout properties along the Gihon as well as the wastewater treatment facility property, if the village decides to relocate the WWTF. Properties involved include the Union Bank, health center and Sterling Market properties as well as residential properties on Railroad St.

The Hazard Mitigation Grant Program provides funding from FEMA filtered through Vermont Emergency Management and aimed at reducing future damage from disasters. Applications need to be submitted by the municipality that will ultimately own the property. This program usually provides 75% federal funding. For the current round associated with the July 2023 and December 2023 floods the state will provide the 25% match with state funds so there is no local match share. It is anticipated that the April round will cover both those disasters. LCPC is in the process of developing the background documentation and analysis needed for the applications, using resources provided by Vermont Emergency Management. LCPC is proposing phased projects. The application would include funding for a first phase that would be more detailed engineering, more

refinement of plans, more work on the benefit-cost analysis, and permitting. If phase one confirms there is a positive benefit, then phase two would be implementation and construction. Both phases would be included in the same application and both would be covered with no local match.

Peter asked what floodplain restoration looks like. Seth said both of these will look at lowering the ground surface elevation to create more room for floodwaters to be stored and revegetating to stabilize slopes and capture debris. Peter asked, similar to the Holmes Meadow project? Seth said yes.

Mike asked if the whole project will be held up if we come across a piece of charred wood that might have been there 600 years ago. Seth said archeology and soil assessments can be included in phase one. Then any necessary remediation or additional assessment work can be incorporated into phase two.

Darrell asked if LCPC is talking about lowering the Union Bank property. The packet of project ideas Adrienne had distributed talked about putting an outdoor market on the Union Bank site. Would it be built in the hole after soil was removed? Tom said those are separate. Phase 1 would be planning and design work, phase 2 would be construction and phase 3 would use different funding to put FEMA-approved outdoor structures in places where there had been buyouts.

Seth said LCPC is proposing a joint application from the town and the village for the Gihon properties because the town will own the properties after the buyouts but there is also important village utilities infrastructure on them. And the village-owned WWTF property will potentially be included. A phased application makes sense because we need to consider how to protect utilities infrastructure. More work needs to be done for that. Multiple property owners are involved. If one decides not to move forward with a buyout or the village decides not to move the WWTF, a specific property can be pulled from the project.

Seth said the biggest reason to include the WWTF property is that the initial modeling work that has been done is suggesting that reducing the fill at the buyout properties will be more effective if restoration also occurs at the WWTF, because a lot of flooding in that area is caused by water backing up from the Lamoille. Initial modeling is indicating that the greatest benefits are from reduction in velocity of the river more than lowering the surface level. Currently velocities are right above the point where they can cut new channels or damage infrastructure. The velocity reductions would mean flooding would be less damaging. Unfortunately we are not seeing significant reductions of surface area with just the buyouts unless we also open up the confluence with the WWTF. Then we could see a reduction of an inch to several inches.

Ken asked if the Union Bank project will affect the pole stabilization the village is working on. Will they stabilize the pole and then have to re-stabilize it? Seth said the goal is to do the project in a way that won't slow down the stabilization and will provide additional protection. Erik said the engineer working on this went to look at the pole with him and Nate Brigham.

Erik asked if the modeling that shows that the WWTF is the key to the flood mitigation efforts will be part of the Community Development Block Grant application. Seth said yes. He thinks it will be important.

Will asked how much of a reduction is proposed for the Union Bank property. Seth said we need to do more work between now and April and during phase 1 to determine that. Because of the pole issue, the initial concept is to lower the fill pad so it matches the current ground level, but we have to consider the pole and village infrastructure. Melissa Manka said there was discussion of lowering it by about a foot, but that is the more complex property due to the number of utilities and the erosion on the site. It would need more engineering and modeling than other properties. Will said he adjoins that property. He suggests looking behind the church at where the river will cut across at some point and where it will hit the Union Bank property.

Will asked about the elevation change at the Pomerleau property and how it will affect the adjacent Community Bank's parking. If the elevation is lowered and the bank loses its parking, we will lose the bank. Does that factor into the decision? Tom said Vermont Emergency Management is aware of the parking situation. Currently Community Bank and Pomerleau are discussing a subdivision. If that can't happen, we have talked about a 30 ft. gravel access strip/parking lot, which would be allowed. Will asked, permeable concrete isn't allowed? Tom said that is still to be worked out. Gravel was the first suggestion. Will said he heard that subdivision was not an option, but it sounds like it is not true that a buyout can't happen if it does not involve the entire property. Tom said VEM is investigating the option of subdivision. The other option is a permeable surface. We won't be lowering the elevation all the way up to the edge of the bank property. We will consider the neighboring properties.

Seth said this is one reason a phased approach makes sense. There are parking and utility pole issues. There is value in talking to people like Will who have seen how the river has migrated. The initial work will try to take the parking into account. The plan is for this to happen post-buyout so adjustments can be made if some property owners choose not to proceed with buyouts.

Ken said the cause of the erosion is the river cutting across the field behind the church and hitting the pole. Will said that will be the main course of the river at some point.

Diana Osborn said other towns in Vermont are seeing a need to address the length of bridges. With this project, if we widen the path of the river, does the Route 15 bridge over the Gihon now need to be widened as well? Seth said LCPC is also working on doing hydraulic modeling of the Gihon, which will include looking at the question of whether widening the bridge would reduce flooding. Actual implementation of widening the bridge is being kept separate. A lot of coordination with VTrans would be needed.

Tom asked if the joint application will say that the town will be the future owner of all the properties other than the WWTF but the village will keep the existing easements. Seth said that is our starting point. If it makes sense to shift some utility easements that could be discussed in phase one. One reason for it to be a joint application is because the easements are there.

Tom said the town reached out to AOT about doing a collaborative application for flood mitigation work involving the bridge Diana mentioned. They are making a conscious effort to create ways to collaborate with towns on flood mitigation involving their infrastructure.

Eben pointed out that there are a lot of important village utilities on the Wescom Road property. Seth said if there are utility needs on the Wescom Road property it may make sense for the village to be a co-applicant for that project too.

Eben asked if the Wescom Road elevation will stay the same. Seth said the current modeling has the road remaining at its current elevation to avoid displacement elsewhere, but the modeling is looking at what to do about inflow and outflow of the culvert at the bottom of Wescom Road.

Erik said it would be nice to raise that road and have pass-through culverts under it. Tom said there is a possibility of an emergency utility road that would connect the end of Wescom to the Laraway property. That road could be used in case of flooding. Erik said it could also be used by Wescom Road residents when there was flooding.

Adrienne asked about the timeline for these projects. Eben said they will take years. Seth agreed.

Mike moved that the selectboard chair enter into an agreement with the Lamoille County Planning Commission to apply for Hazard Mitigation Grant Program grants for the Wescom Road property and multiple potential buyout properties on the Gihon River as presented tonight, and to authorize the chair to sign the agreement, Peter seconded and the motion was passed.

Will moved that the village join the town in joint applications for Hazard Mitigation Grant Program grants for the Wescom Road property and multiple potential buyout properties on the Gihon River as presented tonight, and to authorize the chair to sign the application agreement, Darrell seconded and the motion was passed.

7. Discussion about Scheduling Hazard Mitigation and A/C Work on Municipal Building in Light of Possible Tear-Down

Eben suggested talking about the air conditioning work first and the boards agreed. Ken has asked him about the possibility of putting a pause on the work. The town has selected a contractor and he thinks if we back out at this point we will have to pay over half the cost of the work anyway and he thinks we will probably be using this building for several years even if it is eventually torn down. He is not recommending pausing the work.

Ken said the hope was that we could repair the air conditioning for the lower level and spend \$1000 to get window units for the upstairs so we could save money. Tom had mentioned there was a repair we could possibly do to make the bottom work. Eben said we are going with the option where the indoor units aren't being replaced, just the outdoor condensers. He thinks the contractor has already ordered all the equipment so if we decided not to proceed we would only save the cost of the labor. It is a local contractor. Mike said this work was already approved by both boards and the town has a legally binding contract. Erik said he heard that the condensers could go to another building. Tom said he asked the contractors about moving the heat pumps and that is the case. Ken said he agrees that the project has gone too far and it would not be smart to stop it now.

Ken said the planned mitigation work on the outside of the building is grant-funded, but do we want to possibly waste \$80K on that work when in 2-3 months we might be able to say there is an 80% chance the WWTF move to the municipal building property is going through? Will the funds go away if we don't spend them now?

Tom said we have to have the work completed and the reimbursement requests sent in by December 31, 2025. The contractor is already scheduled to start.

Ken said it will look bad if we rip the new wall down less than a year after we put it up. Peter said we could be in this building for more than a year and it could flood in a month.

Eben said we have the work lined up. He believes we need to protect the municipal building. Even if the village gets funding to move the WWTF, he thinks this building will still be used for 2 or 3 years. Ken said it won't be 2 years before the village decides if they can move to the municipal building property. Eben asked, if the village were told today that there was funding for the move, how long would it realistically take before this building was torn down and all staff were moved out? Erik said if we got the go-ahead today the building could be torn down next spring. His guess is that town and village staff would need to find an interim location while deciding on a permanent location.

Mike suggested we could get the building appraised and the village could buy out the town. Then the village could do what they want with the building and the town would pay rent in the interim. Ken said he doesn't want to buy the building with the mitigation work done if it turns out we will be taking it down.

Mike said we have a contract and we need to follow through. The money is available and he feels we need to fix the building. He doesn't feel it is wasting taxpayer money to protect this building.

Tom said the earliest applications will be accepted is June. The earliest a grant award will be announced is September. We could do development and design of a new building in the winter. Then we would need to build another building before we could tear this one down. If construction on a new building was done in 2026, this building would not be torn down until fall 2026 or more likely summer 2027.

Ken said the village would rebuild at the current location rather than wait that long. The WWTF will not last 2 more years.

Tom said there were 850 people employed by the federal government to manage the Community Development Block Grant. They just laid off 700 of them. There are only 150 people left to manage the same pot of money. Other states are getting much more money than Vermont. We will be off the radar. He would bet we will be in this building for 2 more years if everything goes as planned. The money for the work is coming out of town coffers and being reimbursed to the town. The biggest risk to the village is that the office would be closed for a week or two during the work. Otherwise all the cost and liability is the town's. Ken pointed out that village residents are town residents.

Eben said he believes the work has to be done. The town is only out about \$50K right now from the 2023 flooding. But there were financial hits for the village when this building was flooded. He understands there is potential for this money to be wasted. He has no interest in slowing the process down but he is looking at the speed with which government usually works. The village told the town to handle this work. We have a contractor lined up. He wishes we had had this conversation 2 months ago.

Darrell asked about the plan for the office during construction. Tom said the contractor thought the work could be done in 2 weeks. The office will be closed to the public as it was during COVID but employees will have access during most of the construction period.

Erik said if the village does decide to move the WWTF to the municipal building property, he doesn't think they could wait for a full rebuild and relocation of the office to start construction. Maybe we could get temporary space at the college. Eben said he doesn't recall any previous conversation on an interim move, but he is not opposed to the idea.

Ken said if the town is not willing to delay the mitigation work, the village is not stopping the project. Will said he thinks moving forward with mitigation now is the best option, even though moving the WWTF here may become the best option in the future.

8. *Skating Rink Discussion*

Mike said Tuesday Night Live is not going to be held on Legion Field this year. It is a perfect time to level out the skating rink area. The rink is an asset for the town and village and he would like the town and village to work together to level the ground and get the Legion Field spigot fixed so the rink can be flooded without the hydrant.

Will said the hydrant can't be used per village regulations. Erik said he and Brian have talked and have a plan worked out. Ken said nothing is worked out. We have money in our proposed village budget for the village to pay an employee to fill the rink. This conversation can't happen until we know if we have funding to do that. The village has allowed enough time for one person to flood the rink during working hours so there is no overtime. We are waiting for village residents to approve the proposed budget.

Brian Raulinaitis said the suggestion is to level the field this year because Tuesday Night Live will not be on Legion Field so we don't have to worry about the grass. The field needs to be leveled by about 10 inches. It doesn't need to be completely level, just within 3 or 4 inches. It will protect the liners if there is not as big a height difference between sides of the rink. The area to be leveled is about 3200 sq. ft. Once that is done, less water will be needed to fill it. He doesn't think a hydrant will be needed. He doesn't think any soil needs to be added; the crown just needs to be removed.

Ken suggested the town handle the dirt leveling and the village handle the water. There was general agreement.

9. *Letters of Support for CDS Funding*

Adrienne said the town is trying to get Congressionally Directed Spending funding for a multi-use water plaza. A water plaza is an innovative urban space designed to manage stormwater while serving as a multifunctional community area. It can store water when there is flooding and when it is not flooded it can be used as a recreation area. It could be an amphitheater. In the winter it could be an ice rink. It could be a picnic area with cement tables and chairs. It would be hooked up to an irrigation system to reroute water when flooding has ended.

Will said floodwaters in Vermont are full of diesel, kerosene and fecal matter. Who will pay for hazmat to clean it after a flood? That would have to be done before letting the public back in.

Tom he met with Senator Welch's office today about this. The idea is to create a gateway into Johnson where there will be open space after we lose the store. Will makes a good point. He will probably ask Vermont Emergency Management how other towns have dealt with that. Other towns have done this. Will asked if other towns in Vermont have done it. Tom said he doesn't know. Eben said he doesn't know of a water plaza in Vermont. Will makes a good point from a human safety standpoint, but he is still in support of the project.

Darrell asked if this would fall in line with what LCPC is planning. Tom said yes. After the elevation on the property was lowered, this project would keep it from being a dead space. We got confirmation today that if we get the money we can delay the project until the flood mitigation is done.

Ken asked where people would park. Adrienne said we could have a gravel parking lot.

Ken asked, this would be at the Union Bank site? Adrienne said that is one place we are considering. Tom said it is a very vague grant. It is about creating community involvement and economic development. The concepts are a possible outdoor farmer's market or an outdoor recreational venue. He thinks that could be a lot of things. The grant application will talk about how we put together flood mitigation and those other things together. There are different accounts this funding comes through and we are targeting two that there is not a lot of competition for. Including flood mitigation makes the application more competitive. Will asked, this would be at the Union Bank property. Eben said or at the Pomerleau property. Adrienne said we are putting in two applications – one for the water plaza and one for moving the municipal building. Tom said the application will not tie us into a project. It is about doing community development and economic development while also doing flood mitigation.

The trustees agreed Erik should write letters of support for the applications. Will said if there is a project, the town's communication with Erik is of utmost importance to him.

Ken asked, there is no match money? Tom said there will be some match that depends on our socioeconomic status. He thought it would be 25% but was told it would not be that high. Erik said for CDS the match can be in kind services. Adrienne said we could look for another grant to cover match.

Mike moved to direct Adrienne and Tom to write a letter of support from the town for the CDS applications, Peter seconded and the motion was passed.

10. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 7:15.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths