

JOHNSON VILLAGE TRUSTEE BOARD
ANNUAL VILLAGE MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2025

Present:

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

Others: Erik Bailey, Dan Copp, Nate Brigham, Gordy Smith, Steve Smith, Jon Gregg, Louise von Weise, Kyle Nuse, George Pearlman, Diane Lehouiller, Peter Hammond, Kim Dunkley, Scott Meyer, Adrienne Parker, Arjay West, Susan Tinker, Martha Leonard and several others

Ken Tourangeau called the meeting to order at 7:30.

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Ken explained that village president Eric Osgood could not make it to this meeting. He asked for a motion to appoint Gordy Smith as president pro tem. Will Jennison moved to appoint Gordy Smith as village president pro tem, Steve Hatfield seconded and the motion was passed by a voice vote.

Gordy read the meeting warning. He explained where village residents and non-residents should sit. He suggested a motion to allow department heads who are not village residents to speak if called upon. Will Jennison moved to allow non-resident village department heads to speak if called upon, Darrell Wescom seconded and the motion was passed by a voice vote.

Article 2. Will the Village vote to adopt the Annual Report of the Auditors for the year ending December 31, 2024 as printed?

The article was moved and seconded as printed and 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 the motion was seconded and 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?

Erik Bailey noted that about \$1.4 million of the proposed \$1,839,382 budget is grant money that will be spent on the village garage project.

Will Jennison moved and Martha Leonard seconded to vote a budget of \$1,839,382 to meet the expenses and liabilities of the Village.

Kim Dunkley said she is speaking up for people who are not getting salary increases. As people have exited Johnson and water, electricity and tax revenue has declined, we are still seeing a lot of money being spent. She is asking the board to keep a keen eye on how expenses can be reined in to what people who live here can pay. If that isn't done, people like her won't be able to stay here.

Ken Tourangeau said the board worked hard on the budget this year. As he recalls, the only addition was hours for the village crew to do the skate rink. Erik Bailey noted that wages and insurance are down overall from last year. There was an increase for municipal building maintenance. Will Jennison said keeping budgets affordable is foremost in his mind whenever increases are discussed. If there is an increase, it is an unavoidable one. The percent increase in the budget this year was nominal given the rate of inflation.

Kim asked if the village keeps in mind the cost of future maintenance for grant-funded projects. Will said that is always a consideration.

Ken said last year the village asked voters to borrow money for an electric bucket truck. The amount spent was well under what the village asked for. Another new expense this year is the new website.

Diane Lehouiller asked if the entire cost of the village garage is covered in this budget. The trustees won't ask for more money to finish building it? Ken said that is not the plan. Erik said as it is looking now he doesn't see the village coming to the voters for more money. Any construction project can have twists but it currently appears that the project will be completely grant funded. It is an almost \$2 million project that is not using any money from village taxes.

Ken said the village previously allocated ARPA funds to the garage project. Diane asked what the total ARPA amount is. Erik said about \$400K. The village also got \$825K in Congressionally Directed Spending from Sen. Welch's office. A \$273K energy resilience grant from the state Department of Buildings and General Services will take care of the balance.

Scott Meyer said people in the village don't have a lot of cash and just got electric rate increases. Water and sewer rate increases are coming. There is no more money for a lot of residents. We will lose a lot of infrastructure after the buyouts. What is the plan?

Erik Bailey said we need growth. The water and sewer rate increases are because of the loss of water and sewer users. Loss of users is one reason for the electric rate increase. Another is the Vermont legislature's rate structure and net metering prices. For instance, this past year our budget was negatively affected by the sunny spring and fall that allowed more solar generation. We lost a lot of revenue to net metering. Most of the electric budget we have no control over.

Scott said in the past we have talked about doing solar for the village but there were issues. Has there been any more research into that? Erik said he is researching a battery bank system that will not generate anything but will shave peak usage. It can also provide resiliency for brownouts.

Ken Tourangeau said we don't have control over a lot. We can purchase cheaper equipment, as we did with the recent skid steer purchase. We do as much as we can. But a lot is up to the state.

Scott noted that no legislators are here. Has there been reach-out to them? Ken said yes.

Erik said Village of Johnson is in the middle statewide with regard to electric rates. If you take away other small municipalities that have generation capability like dams, we are close to the least expensive.

Scott asked if anyone has looked into what could be saved if all the independent utilities combined. Erik said VPPSA has recently started looking into potential efficiencies from working together.

Diane Lehouiller asked if the trustees are working with the selectboard on the Jewett property. The industrial park would bring in more water and electric usage. Ken said there is really nothing the village can do to work with them other than providing them services. Erik Bailey and Nate Brigham have met with them and given them prices for hookups. Ken and Erik explained that service to the industrial park will be underground and the town will need to hire a contractor to put it in. Once the service is completed, the village will take it over.

George Pearlman said we buy power from Canada. Erik Bailey said 25-30% of the village's power comes from Canada. George asked if there is any word on how tariffs will affect us. Erik said right now tariffs on energy are small. They could result in a 2-3% increase.

George asked about sewer capacity. Do we have capacity to build? Erik said yes. George asked if there have been applications. Erik said there have been some. The Woolen Mills is building a restaurant with short-term rental space above it. A property on River Road was just sold to someone who is putting in apartments. Ken said he thinks there will be 8 apartments.

George commented that we lost a number of customers from the flood and college use is down. Erik agreed that college usage is lower. The loss of the grocery store also impacted the village.

George asked, if someone wants to build, they have to get permits? Erik said they have to get an allocation. Our water and sewer allocations are probably the least expensive around. George asked if a new allocation is needed for an expansion. Erik said yes; an expanded allocation is needed.

The motion was passed by a voice vote.

Article 6. To do such other business as may properly be brought before this meeting.

BJ Putvain said the new village website went live today. He showed some key features of the website. It shows weather from the weather station at Johnson Elementary. It lists local businesses and helpful resources. Anyone in the village who wants their business listed can call and ask. When there are flood warnings they will be shown. There is a page showing current and past trustees. The village is looking for pictures of some past trustees. There is a payment portal. Forms and documents are available. There is information on upcoming events. There is a page on the library move. There will also be pictures and information on the garage rebuild and wastewater updates. Meeting videos will be available.

Ken Tourangeau gave BJ kudos for all his work on switching over to the new website. There was a round of applause.

Erik Bailey said this is Steve Hatfield's last meeting as a trustee. He previously served as chair and filled in when there was no village manager at the same time. He got a lot done. There was a round of applause for Steve. Ken and BJ thanked him for all he has done for the village.

There was a question about the status of the Johnson General Store. Peter Hammond said the owner told him it should be open by the end of April. Diane Lehouiller said if anyone wants to help the owner clean coolers or surfaces they should call or stop in.

Kim Dunkley said after all the work done on the municipal building and for people coming into the village and town, she would not like to see the sewage treatment plant relocated to the municipal building site. She feels the plant should either be rebuilt where it is or there should be more brainstorming. The municipal building in its current location is a nice representation when people come into town.

Jon Gregg said there is a rumor that the municipal offices will move to the college. Ken Tourangeau said nothing is set in stone. A lot of conversations are going on. It is possible that the offices could be relocated, the existing municipal building would come down, and the sewer treatment plant would be moved to the municipal building lot to get it out of the flood zone.

Erik Bailey said the plant's current location is in the floodplain. FEMA and the state will give us most of the cost of building back in place while upgrading to current codes and elevating the building for flood mitigation. That cost is estimated at \$14 million. Our local match would be about \$300K. FEMA still hasn't finished calculating what they would pay to move the plant out of the flood zone. Generally they will give the same amount it would cost to rebuild where it was. But moving it would cost about \$12 million more. The only way we can move the plant into a safer area is if we get other grant sources. The Community Development Block Grant program has \$58 million targeted to Washington County and Johnson. There is the possibility that we could get a grant big enough to fund the additional cost of moving the plant beyond the amount FEMA will pay.

Jon Gregg asked, the municipal building would be torn down? Will Jennison said it would have to come down. This is where the plant would go if we moved it. The other possibility is rebuilding where it is.

Jon asked, does the village lose the opportunity to get the \$14 million if a decision is made to try to move the plant? Or can the village decide to go back and get the \$14 million? Ken said we haven't committed to anything. We have been working on the project to rebuild in place and we are not stopping that unless we find out we can get enough money for relocating. If the plant is relocated it would go where the municipal building parking lot is now. Erik said the footprints would overlap by 4 or 5 feet. Ken said if the plant is moved then its current location can be restored to floodplain, which would help with flood waters.

Jon asked if the college is involved with discussions. Erik said yes. Ken said no one has made a proposal to buy McClelland Hall. Jon asked if there is any chance that building would be donated by the state. Does the village have to buy it? Erik said that all remains to be seen. Jon said it would be interesting to see if we could get them to donate it. Ken said funding was already dedicated to turn the building into low income housing but that has gone nowhere.

Ken said the village won't stop moving forward with plans to rebuild in place until they find out they have money to relocate.

George asked, wasn't there a vote on village and town property at town meeting? Ken said the article on subdividing properties was passed by town voters. The village did not take it up this year because of other projects going on. The trustees didn't think the voters would want them to ask for money for surveying and subdividing. He thinks most of the property should go back to the tax base. Will said that was the original intent when it was bought.

Kyle Nuse said she knows relations between the trustees and selectboard have been rocky for a long time, but it feels like it is getting worse. For instance, there was an opportunity to use one developer for a website that would be for both town and village as we have had in the past, but it was decided that the town and village would pay separately for websites. That cost us all money. She would encourage this board and the selectboard to think about the bigger picture, put egos aside and work for the people they are representing. It is not good for morale if the boards are feuding and it is not good from a financial point of view. The more the two entities separate, the more it causes consequences.

Erik Bailey said he thinks perception may not match how things are going. The last joint selectboard-trustee meeting was pretty cordial. Kyle said she felt the ice rink discussion was not cordial.

Erik said the village had the option of going with the town on a website, but that was much more expensive. It was a fiscal decision. Will said having a separate website saved the village taxpayers money. BJ said paying half the cost of the town website would have been triple the cost of having a separate website.

Kyle said she would just like the boards to try to work together and bring everyone closer together.

Kyle said it is great that the Cold Spring floor was redone. She thanked the board for that. One thing that would make the Cold Spring more accessible would be a handrail down the middle of the stairs. It is precarious for older people and many who use the spring are older. If that could be considered, she would appreciate it.

Kyle said she has noticed an uptick in what she would consider to be white Christian nationalism seeping into the village. First the trustees began reciting the Pledge of Allegiance at each meeting. Then this winter the trees on the municipal building property and the village green had red, white and blue lights. She thinks this is a slippery slope and it is dangerous. We are seeing how it is playing out on a national level. She thinks it should stop.

BJ said the board members are very patriotic. It has nothing to do with Christian nationalism. Ken said anyone who has a problem with the Pledge can stay seated.

Scott Meyer said there is a lot of perception that there is feuding between the trustees and selectboard. When he was chair of the trustees, selectboard chair Eric Osgood talked to him on the phone often. He is not sure if that is still happening. If it is, he thinks the board needs to showcase it because all outsiders see is chaos. The trustees should showcase what they do with the selectboard so people know it is not all feuds. BJ said overall both boards are working together. There will just be issues here and there that they do not agree on. Scott suggested examples of the trustees and selectboard working together could be included in the village newsletter. Ken said he speaks to selectboard chair Eben Patch every day or two. Darrell Wescom said he doesn't have any ill will towards the selectboard. Will said another way to perceive things is that when the town and village have a disagreement it is because each is standing up for their constituents. If the trustees do not agree with the selectboard it is because they are trying to look out for the voters of the village. Jon Gregg suggested there could be a section on the village website talking about positive things and showing that the trustees and selectboard are getting along. Ken said if people would show up at more meetings maybe they would understand that there are not always disagreements. He suggested people can show up and inject comments when they see a problem.

Gordy Smith said the village has been through a lot of disasters. He thanked Rosemary Audibert and her staff for all they do. He thanked Erik Bailey for being part of the team. He is a big asset for the village. He thanked Dan Copp, Nate Brigham and the electric crew, chief Arjay West and all the firefighters.

Kim Dunkley asked that the village get in compliance with regard to extension cords wrapped around lights. That could lead to a big fine for our town. Erik said that will be addressed later this week. Other work was put aside in March to move things out of the garage.

Erik Bailey suggested that people read the village manager's report in the Village Annual Report to learn about the accomplishments of village employees and the accolades they have received.

Ken asked Erik to give an update on the library move and the associated power outages. Erik said the move will start in the early morning hours of April 26. A large part of the village will be without power for several hours because basically every line between the current library location and School Street needs to be moved. The town is contracting with Green Mountain Power so there will be extra crews and trucks. The cost for that and the sheriff's department is all in the grant budget. Will said the library will be traveling on Route 15 from 3:00 to 6:00 a.m. Erik said that is the only time of day we can close Main Street. Ken noted that phones and internet will be out as well as power. Erik said viewing of the move will be kept at a distance. There was a question about when the building will reach School Street. Erik said late morning, towards lunch.

It was moved and seconded to adjourn, the motion was passed by a voice vote and the meeting was adjourned at 8:32.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths