

Minutes of the Selectboard Meeting of
Wednesday, Jun 8, 2022, at 6:30 pm

This meeting was conducted via teleconference using ZOOM according to Open Meeting Law requirements. Members present: Roger Arnold, Chair; Mary Layton, Vice Chair; Claudette Brochu; Marcia Calloway; Robert Gere; Rod Francis, Town Manager; Miranda Bergmeier, Assistant to the Town Manager.

Also participating: Amy Stringer, Andy Sherer, Demo Sofronas, Stuart Richards, Leslie Wells, Marshall Hineberg, Peter Orner, Linda Cook, Fielding Essensa, Cheryl Lindberg, Jan Laaspere, Bill Schiavone, Anna Ingraham, Charlotte Metcalf, Rob Beckett, Leslie Wells, Bonnie Munday, Michelle Tine, Jenny Barba, Georgios Katsaros, Andrew Torkelson.

1. Convene Meeting – at 6:30 pm.
2. Agenda Review. Layton **moved** (2nd Gere) to approve the agenda with the addition of an executive session after #10 to discuss staffing changes. **Motion approved (4- yes; Calloway- abstain).**
3. Public Participation. Amy Stringer read aloud from written comments relating her concerns about the Norwich Police Department (NPD). Stringer supports fully staffing the NPD. Andy Scherer read aloud from a Valley News story about Lebanon building a sidewalk; he said he wants Norwich to take near-term action for pedestrian safety. Demo Sofronas is concerned about what's happening in Norwich, especially with the NPD. Stuart Richards would like to see if there's an MOU between the school and town regarding the school's septic system. Richards expressed concern about town staffing shortages and wants to know what problems exist in personnel. Leslie Wells and Marshall Hineberg said they are concerned about NPD and the Dept. of Public Works (DPW) and they would like to see robust NPD and DPW staffing. Cheryl Lindberg said the Listers today filed the preliminary grand list (aka "abstract"). The abstract will be available on the town website and in the Town Clerk's office for review. Linda Cook expressed concern about NPD staffing and town issues. Jan Laaspere said he is concerned that he has heard from different employees with concerns about the work environment in Norwich; he thinks the town residents want a fully-staffed NPD. Peter said he wants the SB to look at traffic calming; he is concerned about the work environment in the Town of Norwich and wants to know if there is a toxic work environment in Norwich. Bill Schiavone said the NPD has been very helpful to him and his neighbors; he is worried about losing police officers and wants Norwich to maintain a police force, especially to police the outskirts of town. Arnold said the SB believes that Norwich must be a safe and respectful work environment. Calloway agreed and said she is concerned about the circumstances of Chief Keeling's departure and wants to know the details. Stuart Richards said he spoke directly to unnamed employees who said they had various concerns that were not addressed; he didn't know if those concerns could have been addressed, or not. He wants to know how many employees have left Norwich employ. Linda Cook asked about the police memo mentioned by Calloway. Calloway read aloud the following: Normally, the selectboard is consulted about its agenda before it is decided or published. That did not happen this week, at least I was not consulted, before it was published by the town manager on Saturday June 4th. I find that fact disturbing in general, but particularly so in light of Chief Keeling's departure this week and his May 26 memo to the selectboard and town manager requesting attention and assistance with departmental staffing needs, which is also not in the packet. To be clear, I don't know what has happened. The only information I have about this is from concerned citizens, listserv posts, and the Valley News; in other words, second-hand information. What concerns me are facts and law. In a town like Norwich which

voted for a town manager form of organization, it is one of the town manager's duties to supervise, appoint, remove, and fix the salaries of the police, using the monies approved by the board and voted by the town. However the town manager is "in all matters...subject to the direction and supervision....of the selectboard" and serves "at the will of [the] selectboard." My concern is that we need to know the facts leading up to Chief Keeling's departure. If, as is indicated on the listserv, there was a discussion of insubordination and a member of the selectboard asked for a last date of employment, many questions are raised including whether current personnel policies were followed and were statutory roles properly maintained. Those questions must be asked by this board, and we now have a Human Resource expert who can help us answer them, assuming Chief Keeling is willing to assist us. What we cannot do is 'draw a line' under yet another personnel loss and explain it away without independent analysis and recommendations for improvement. We owe a responsibility to Norwich taxpayers who have a right to expect transparency in government, and stability and safety in their town, not to mention accountability for the money they entrust to our use.

4. Announcements, Town Manager's Report. Francis said he has been meeting with the Vermont State Police (VSP) and Officer-In-Charge Anna Ingraham to discuss a plan for police coverage. We have put plans in place for coverage. Gere asked about advertising for open positions; Francis said we have 2 open postings. Officer Anna Ingraham said she had looked and the existing position was out of date and only for on part-time position. Calloway suggested that we consider hiring bonuses for police officers. Brochu asked how Norwich's police pay compares statewide; Francis said he doesn't have that data, but he's been told our pay is lower than some. The pay is set by a union contract. Charlotte Metcalf said that she knows of former employees who left for less pay than they were receiving in Norwich. Arnold asked how we are supporting Officer Ingraham. Francis commended Ingraham for her professionalism under difficult circumstances and said he has been meeting frequently with her. Rob Beckett wondered about NPD staffing coverage and is concerned that we won't be staffed adequately. Leslie Wells said she wonders about emergency measures to put into place to address policing concerns; she wonders if we should have further public meetings to inform the public. Francis said he hopes the SB will talk tonight about a plan to move forward with recruiting for police officers. Arnold said that we have had shortages in our police department since 2018; former Chief Frank worked extremely long hours to provide coverage. Francis said he hopes to have a detailed discussion with the Thetford Town Manager about sharing resources. Calloway said she wants to the SB to discuss tonight how to recruit, whether to offer signing bonuses, etc. Arnold said he's not prepared to have that discussion tonight; he is open to a meeting next week, however. Brochu said she wants to know before a detailed discussion: can we merge police departments with Thetford, how does our pay scale compare with other police departments; and job descriptions. Francis said our union contract controls a wide array of working conditions, so we will have to work within that. Layton said she is frustrated trying to put out a quick reassuring message to the public, given the constraints of the system; she sympathizes with the public's desire for answers and quick action. Arnold said the SB needs to have some resolve to stick with the problem. Calloway said that she wants to meet as a SB in 1 week and wants to have as much discussion in public session as humanly possible so as to be as transparent as possible. Francis said he's not sure if he'll be ready to meet in 1 week because he has planned to meet with the union in 1 to 1.5 weeks to open discussion, so a meeting in 1.5 – 2 weeks would probably be more productive for the next SB meeting. Calloway said she wants to know how and if other area PDs have adjusted their pay scales; she offered to do some research work if helpful. Gere said he works in the school system and it's very hard to hire people right now, which makes it very important to have competitive pay and a positive and welcoming work environment. Jan Laaspere said it's important for the Sb to state very positively that they strongly support their police. Michelle Tine recommended having a 3rd party conduct exit interviews with departing employees, rather than having existing staff do the interviews. Francis said DPW has been working on the Moore Lane bridge situation and have gotten a proposal from a company to remedy the presumptive creosote substance leaking from the bridge. Francis said that

town staff are meeting with the State soon to discuss options and develop a plan to fix the problem. Francis said that DPW recently tested an electric mower, but it proved to be unsuitable. We will be testing a different electric mower soon. Calloway and Arnold asked if we can benefit from the creosote experience of other towns. Brochu said we need to put out an advertisement for citizen applicants to the Wastewater Study group. Jenny Barba asked about mowing in the cemeteries. Francis said the Cemetery Commission, which is an entity separate from other town government, is responsible for cemetery maintenance, but Francis has reached out to a contractor today to possibly help the Cemetery Commission to find someone to do the mowing. Cheryl Lindberg said she thinks if bonuses are paid to town workers, we need to make sure the employee stays for a certain length of time. Lindberg said the Cemetery Commission is currently arranging with a contractor to mow. Brochu said the departure of the Finance Assistant was wholly because of family circumstances – the employee’s partner took a new job in another state, rather than the result of any dissatisfaction with the job itself. Brochu said she is fully in support of Rod Francis as TM; he has fulfilled the SB’s request to provide data-driven reports and requests. She said there were many personnel issues in existence before Francis came on board. Brochu believes Francis is doing a stellar job in very difficult circumstances.

5. Consent Agenda. Layton **moved** (2nd Gere) to approve the consent agenda. **Motion approved unanimously.**

6. Follow-up on the License Agreement with SAU 70. Arnold gave some background on the licensing agreement. Jenny Barba expressed concern about the need to outdoor educational space for students in Norwich. Layton **moved** (2nd Gere) to approve the reciprocal License Agreement between the Town of Norwich and the Norwich School District, as contained in the Selectboard meeting packet. **Motion approved unanimously.** Layton **moved** (2nd Brochu) to authorize the Town Manager to be the signatory on the License Agreement. **Motion approved unanimously.**

7. Committee Appointments. Georgios Katsaros spoke in support of his application for the Advance Transit Board. Layton **moved** (2nd Brochu) to appoint Georgios Katsaros as Norwich representative on the Advance Transit Board for a 3-year term expiring in May 2025. **Motion approved unanimously.** Andrew Torkelson spoke in support of his application for the Conservation Commission. Layton **moved** (2nd Brochu) to appoint Andrew Torkelson to the Conservation Commission for a 4-year term expiring in March 2026. **Motion approved unanimously.**

8. Set Transfer Station Fees for FY2023. SB members expressed concern about raising the fees too much. Fielding Essensa, Finance Director, provided background information about the Transfer Station and DPW budget. Andy Scherer, who serves on the Solid Waste Committee, said that Norwich provides more services than most other town our size do. SB members discussed what level of subsidy they want to provide for the Transfer Station. Brochu proposed evaluating what a 25% subsidy would look like; Brochu thinks that a 10% subsidy would be too little because it results in too great an increase in sticker and punch card fees. Francis said he will come back to the SB with fee schedule options of 25% and 30% subsidies and options for discontinuing some collections. SB members agreed to take up this topic again at the next SB meeting.

9. Casella Agreement for Waste Hauling. After brief discussion, Layton **moved** (2nd Brochu) to authorize the Town Manager to sign the 12-month extension to the agreement (including the food waste addendum) with Casella expiring March 30, 2023. **Motion approved unanimously.**

10. Selectboard Work Calendar. Francis introduced the topic by discussing Tracy Hall, and its particular issues and challenges. SB members reviewed and discussed the proposed assessment

plan, as contained in the SB packet. Brochu **moved** (2nd Layton) to approve the Physical Plan Needs Assessment Plan, as contained in the Selectboard meeting packet. **Motion approved unanimously.** SB members agreed to defer discussion of the town's digital footprint until a future meeting.

****ADDED AGENDA ITEM: Executive Session to Discuss Personnel Issues.**

Layton **moved** (2nd Brochu) to enter executive session under 1 VSA § 313(a)(3) – "...the appointment or employment or evaluation of a public officer or employee..." – to discuss a personnel issue and to include the Town Manager. **Motion approved unanimously.**

The Selectboard entered executive session at 10:05 PM.

Layton **moved** (2nd Gere) to enter public session. **Motion approved unanimously.**

The SB entered public session at 11:06 PM. No further action was taken, other than to adjourn.

12. Adjourn. Layton **moved** (2nd Gere) to adjourn. **Motion approved unanimously.** Meeting adjourned at 11:06 pm.

By Miranda Bergmeier

Approved by the Selectboard on June 22, 2022

Roger Arnold, Selectboard Chair

Next Meeting – June 22, 2022 – Meeting at 6:30

PLEASE NOTE: CATV POSTS RECORDINGS OF ALL REGULAR MEETINGS OF THE NORWICH SELECTBOARD