

Minutes of the Selectboard Meeting of
Wednesday, July 13, 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; Marcia Calloway; Robert Gere; Rod Francis, Town Manager.

Also participating: Lieutenant Hugh O'Donnell (VSP), Stuart Richards, Amy Stringer, Demo Sofronas, Charlotte Metcalf, Jaan Laaspere, Michael Costa, Cheryl Lindberg, Bonnie Munday, Pam Smith

1. Convene Meeting at -- 6:32 pm.
2. Agenda Review. Layton **moved** (2nd Calloway) to approve the agenda. **Motion approved unanimously.**
3. Public Participation. Stuart Richards requested that the Board hold meetings in-person and answer more questions from the community. Amy Stringer said she doesn't understand why the Board can't have an open, honest conversation. Amy Stringer said that feels that it's the Board's job to implement what the voters want, and she wants the police department back in full swing. Demo Sofronas asked the Board to listen to what residents have to say and keep the lines of communication open. Charlotte Metcalf apologized for errors made in previous correspondence and then read a letter sent to her by a resident with police staffing concerns. Jaan Laaspere asked the Board to share a version of the HR report with the public. Michael Costa commented that he thinks many people in town are concerned and that the Town should be transparent and pivot to problem-solving. Stuart Richards asked for a Q&A for residents as an agenda item. Arnold said the Town is committed to fostering a safe and respectful workplace and the Town has engaged various expertise to do that work and when that work is finished the Town hopes to share to the extent possible what the Board learns.
4. Consent Agenda. Layton **moved** (2nd Calloway) to approve the A/P warrant in the meeting packet. **Motion approved unanimously.**

Approve Draft Minutes. Board Members discussed best procedures for receiving corrections to draft meeting minutes from Board Members and members of the public. Layton **moved** (2nd Gere) to approve the draft minutes as presented in the packet. Demo Sofronas said he wants the Board to consider his addition that is part of the packet. Charlotte Metcalf said she provided additions in accordance with instructions provided by Town Staff. **Motion approved (3-yes; Calloway-no).**

Correspondence. Layton **moved** (2nd Gere) to receive correspondence. Calloway asked for an update on the letter regarding tax overpayment refunds. Fielding Essensa, Finance

Director, reminded the board that the past practice with tax overpayments was identified as a problem by the auditor during her presentation to the Board, and subsequently in the audit report. Monthly tax payments resulting in a credit being owed back to the taxpayer are identified after the second payment. Previously this has been inappropriately credited to the following years tax payments. Layton asked if there is a way to structure payment plans for residents that do not result in overpayments. Essensa said that he is happy to speak to any taxpayer about a monthly payment plan that will not result in overpayment. The Finance Director offered to provide an explanation to Ms. Ness **Motion approved unanimously.**

5. Town Manager's Report. Francis said he has proceeded with advertising officer positions on the Vermont Criminal Justice Council website and indeed.com. He has completed a preliminary interview with a Police Chief candidate and has asked for feedback on the suitability of the candidate from law enforcement partners before proceeding further. Francis said the Town is thankful for the support of our neighboring towns and the Vermont State Police.

Francis said that he is pleased that the Town was able to secure a bid for an audit from a well-respected firm. Francis said the RFQ for the space analysis for Tracy Hall is circulating and that he has worked with Geoff Martin, TRORC Regional Energy Coordinator, to sign a contract with a HVAC and Energy consultant who will make short-term and medium-term recommendations to address the Boilers in Tracy Hall.

Francis reported on the work with the contractor Clean Harbors on the Moore Lane Bridge noting concerns with the temporary solution. The town is waiting on advice from the Department of Environmental Conservation.

Layton asked about the timeframe for completing the training at the Police Academy for any Police Chief candidate. Francis described how the waiver process would work for an out-of-state hire. Francis said that only one application to date has been from within the State.

Calloway asked Lt. O'Donnell if the local barracks are helping Norwich and how many other towns are in similar staffing situations. Lt. O'Donnell said he believes that Norwich is the only town in the Royalton barracks area that is experiencing such significant shortages.

Arnold asked Lt. O'Donnell to clarify how the Sheriff's office provides coverage in the area and interacts with the State Police.

Lt. O'Donnell said the Sheriff doesn't provide general police coverage unless the town pays, and a lot of Sheriff's departments have dropped their contracts because of their own staffing shortages. Consequently, some towns that have contracted with the Sheriff's department in the past are no longer receiving as much coverage. Arnold noted the topic of police coverage is multi-faceted. O'Donnell replied that contracts that towns have with the Sheriff's department differ from the arrangement the Vermont State Police (VSP) has with Norwich, which is to provide support for urgent response outside the hours of operation for the Norwich Police Department given current staffing levels.

Calloway asked Francis about insurance coverage for the Moore Lane Bridge and if there are any other bridges in the same situation. Francis confirmed that he has emailed with PACIF, the town's insurance carrier. Francis said there is a bridge inventory with condition reports and that currently this is the only bridge with these problems that the town knows of.

Francis said that the contractor who will look at the Tracy Hall Boilers will also be reviewing the DPW garage.

6. Auditing Services. Layton **moved** (2nd Gere) to enter an agreement on behalf of the Town with Sullivan Powers and Company for auditing services for an estimated cost of \$28,000 for 2022 with a 2022 with a cost 'escalator' for subsequent years (2023: \$28,600; 2024: \$29,100; 2025: \$30,000 and 2026: \$30,000?)

Layton asked if the deadline of January 31 was sufficient timing to get information into the Town report. Calloway asked if this was the sole proposal and noted the cost was over what was budgeted. Calloway said she would be more comfortable if the contract was for one year and not several years.

Francis said the cost is a reality of the current market and that we need to decide soon so we can turn an audit around in time. Francis said the contract is for five years but there's a clause that allows either party to move on after the first year. Francis said that the deadline is enough of a buffer for the Town Report.

Cheryl Lindberg, Treasurer, said that Sullivan Powers and Company is a reputable firm.

Motion approved unanimously.

Calloway **moved** (2nd Layton) to reorder the agenda to place the Selectboard Vacancy agenda item as item number seven. **Motion approved unanimously.**

7. Selectboard Vacancy. Arnold asked Board Members how they would like to proceed in addressing the vacancy and noted that the law required a forthwith appointment to be made by Board members.

Bonnie Munday, Town Clerk, said that an appointment would be made until an election and then an election would determine who completes the term.

Calloway said the Board could appoint Pam Smith because she expressed an interest in the position by previously running

Layton said she's in favor of making an appointment until Town Meeting.

Gere also said he is in favor of an appointment until March.

Layton said she would like the Board to cast a wider net for the vacancy and is open to a former Board member to stepping up and helping.

Gere said we should accept applications and make an appointment at the July 27 meeting.

Calloway said we should have someone who hasn't served on the Board before.

Cheryl Lindberg said that in situations of a vacancy in the past Selectboard members did go to the most recent elections

Michael Costa said he supports a wide net for candidates but hears a tension between wanting to attract new people and it being two weeks in the summer is a quick turnaround.

Stuart Richards supports Pam Smith to fill the vacancy.

Demo Sofronas supports Pam Smith to fill the vacancy.

Layton moved (2nd Gere) to advertise for candidates to fill the selectboard vacancy until the next regular election in 2023 with candidates to submit applications by July 21st at 3:00 pm to Roger Arnold, Chair. **Motion approved unanimously.**

8. Layton **moved** (2nd Gere) to find that premature general public knowledge would clearly place the public body, or a person involved at a substantial disadvantage in contract negotiations for labor law legal services. For example, revealing the relative merits of proposals (including costs) received, frank assessment of qualifications and background and details of existing attorney client relations and to invite the Town Manager

Layton moved (2nd Gere) to enter executive session pursuant to 1 VSA §313(a)(1)(A), for the purposes of considering contract terms for labor law legal services?

The Board entered executive session at 8:33 pm

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

The Board entered public session at 9:05 pm.

Layton (2nd Gere) **moved** to authorize the town manager to negotiate and sign a contract with the law firm Stitzel, Page, and Fletcher for labor law services. **Motion approved unanimously.**

9. Layton moved (2nd Gere) to find that premature general public knowledge would clearly place the public body, or a person involved at a substantial disadvantage in the negotiation of labor relations or agreements with employees. For example, revealing bargaining strategy and the towns disposition about current economic conditions and to invite the town manager and the finance director. **Motion approved unanimously**

Layton moved (2nd Calloway) to enter executive session pursuant to 1 VSA §313(a)(1)(B), for the purposes of considering the impact of inflation on personnel retention and recruitment? **Motion approved unanimously.**

Selectboard entered executive session at 9:07 pm

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

The Board entered public session at 10:11

Calloway moved (2nd Layton) to approve a one-time cost of living allowance bonus of 5% for all employees currently employed by the Town of Norwich and hired by September 1, 2022 to be paid in four equal installments to begin immediately and ending June 30, 2023. **Motion approved unanimously.**

Layton (2nd Calloway) **moved** to adjourn. **Motion approved unanimously.**

Meeting adjourned at 10:13

By Roger Arnold

Approved by the Selectboard on _____ July 27, 2022

Roger Arnold, Selectboard Chair

Next meeting – July 27, 6:30 pm