

**Minutes of the Special Selectboard Meeting of
Wednesday, August 16, 2023, at 6:30 pm**

This hybrid meeting was held in the Multipurpose Room in Tracy Hall.

Members present: Marcia Calloway, Chair; Mary Layton, Vice Chair; Roger Arnold; Pamela Smith; Priscilla Vincent

Also participating: Brennan Duffy, Interim Town Manager; Stuart Richards; Judith (Judy) Pond; Linda Gray; Wilfred (Will) Smith; Fran De Gasta; John (Jack) Cushman; Lisa Close; Courtney Dobyms; Brendan Classon; Robert Kewer; Jeffrey Grout; Eric Miller; Paul Manganiello; Daniel Goulet; Mary Gorman; Kris Clement; Charlotte Metcalf

Note that sections are presented here in the order they were addressed at the meeting, which may occasionally differ from their sequential item numbering.

Welcome. Meeting was called to order by Calloway at 6:30 PM. She reminded anyone wishing to join via Zoom[®] to present with both first and last names to help prevent unwelcome intrusions, commonly known as “Zoom-bombing.”

1. Agenda. Layton moved, seconded by Arnold, to approve the agenda as amended.
Passed Unanimously.

2. Minutes. Layton moved, seconded by Smith, to approve the minutes of August 2 with one correction, which will be implemented by Smith. **Passed Unanimously.**

Public Comments for Items not on the Agenda. Stu Richards stood to urge the Board once again to bring the litigation with Katucki concerning Open Meeting Law compliance and enforcement to an immediate conclusion.

3. Tracy Hall Heating. Vincent and Smith reported on their investigation of potential approaches to prepare for heating needs this winter. All agree it is important to consider such options not only because the two oil burners in Tracy Hall are aging and one is currently non-functional but because the Town made the expeditious elimination of fossil fuel usage imperative with passage of Article 36 in 2019. The option remains, however, to meet near-term needs through the purchase of a replacement oil burner or repairs to the existing one that is now inoperable.

In their current research, Smith and Vincent did not consider oil, propane, natural gas or cordwood. In general, their conclusions favor a boiler system burning wood pellets, which are not to be confused with chips. They reported that a consultant had advised

them adopting such a system to replace one of the oil burners would not require extensive alterations of the existing ventilation system, not only saving money but avoiding the permitting requirements likely to be imposed with other solutions.

Layton questioned whether that would indeed prove true. As she had previously, Layton advocated for replacing one burner with a new oil furnace to address shorter-term needs, prevent a frozen-pipe disaster, and allow for greater time to consider longer-term solutions.

Calloway said she would want to see an analysis of what other types of retrofitting might be necessary specifically to accommodate a pellet system, such as silos for the pellets and the piping for their delivery. She wonders too whether it might not be reasonable to continue to rely on Ben Trussell's repair work as means to keep the one oil burner working and perhaps return the other to service. She also said she would welcome the judgment of a professional able to take all factors into consideration, including even options for long-term space usage for Town offices.

Vincent said an additional RFP is in order and sooner rather than later given that winter is now only several months away. She said they've been working with assumptions of approximately \$35,000 to replace one furnace with an up-to-date oil burner or something under \$200,000 for a pellet boiler. She emphasized also that the Town currently enjoys a surplus of available funds to allay the bite of any such investment.

In response to Arnold's assertion that the vote on Article VIII in 2020 simply rejected a \$2MM bond for energy-related investments more generally than the geothermal route, both Smith and Vincent asserted that it was, in fact, widely understood as a firm rejection of any potential geothermal solution.

Arnold stated that as a capital asset, Tracy Hall's energy-related implications must be understood to include not only heating sources but ventilation, design, and functionality, etc., as well. He said the question of what might be an appropriate backup system is open to debate, but not without clear commitment to green energy. He favors either a ground- or air-source heat pump solution and thinks incorporating a pellet burner would be akin to placing another bucket under a leaky roof. As one of the youngest in the room, he advocated for planning for the next generation.

Layton added that she thinks the parameters of a geothermal system were not well enough delineated for the voters leading up to the 2020 vote although she thinks it's actually not particularly complicated. For example, the answer as to where the necessary wells would go is simply the driveway and "they're just wells, people drill wells all the time." Further, she noted that the figures underlying the rejected bond included much more than just implementing geothermal, including ventilation in general and office space usage.

Calloway opened the floor for comments from the general public, cautioning that they should limit their comments to three minutes each.

Judy Pond mentioned that the Upper Valley Music Center, with which she is affiliated, invested about \$400,000 in an entirely new HVAC system using air-based heat pumps and their building has realized savings on electricity and each room has its own climate controls. She said the Town should implement a stop-gap solution for this winter and then adopt a broad-based solution longer term.

Linda Gray, of the Energy Committee, presented a pie chart that had informed the 2020 initiative, which showed 22% of the costs allocated to ground-source heat pump technology while 51% would have gone to ventilation upgrades whose benefits would be more far-ranging. She thinks pellets would be acceptable as a short-term bridge, but she cited literature supporting her contention that in the longer term, they would not prove any better for the environment than burning oil.

Will Smith asserted that geothermal would end up costing much more than the \$2MM in question at the 2020 bond vote and that the voters had indeed decisively rejected it with that vote.

Fran De Gasta said her research suggested geothermal comes with significant negative ramifications itself, as specified by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, such as the need for hazardous waste disposal and potential damage to nearby foundations. She said Renewable Energy Vermont instead advocates air-sourced "cold climate heat pumps."

Jack Cushman, who has served as chair of the Article 36 Taskforce and Solid Waste Committee, said the concerns De Gasta attributed to the Fish & Wildlife Service do not pertain to anything being considered for Norwich and that there would have to be a climate-impact statement for any proposal to employ pellet heating, taking into account what he believes would be its deleterious effects long term.

Lisa Close said she's been very satisfied with the heat-pump retrofit she made in her older home, particularly appreciating its cooling capability.

Courtney Dobyms said she converted to an air-sourced heat pump as well as solar power and now uses no fossil fuel. She's concerned about potential air-quality issues with pellet heating, particularly so close to MCS.

Brendan Classon said ground- and air-based heat pumps are often conflated with each other. His understanding is that the latter does not work as well as the former at higher temperatures. He asked if the current system is failing, to which Calloway replied that it depends on who you ask.

Robert Kewer said it's not fair to compare ground-sourced heat pumps to pellets without fully accounting for the relatively high lifetime cost of the latter. The Town should also consider the fact that pellet burners have no cooling function. He mentioned that the Kilton Library in West Lebanon, NH, uses a geothermal system, which Vincent said they had not known.

Stu Richards recommended getting some kind of temporary solution in place for this winter, particularly given that replacement parts for the old burner may not be available and Ben Trussell may not be able to keep it running regardless.

Calloway welcomed Jeff Grout via Zoom, the Regional Energy Coordinator for TRROC. He agreed Tracy Hall demands some immediate solution but emphasized that heating, ventilation, and air conditioning are together referred to as HVAC because they're all so interrelated. Any major change to the heating aspect will necessitate renovations encompassing the other component systems as well. He did confirm, however, that a pellet burner could be a "drop-in" solution to replace one of the oil furnaces.

Grout added, though, that the building's ventilation system is not now in compliance in regard to health and safety. Pellets would address the requirements of Article 36, but such a system still involves combustion and their claimed environmental advantage over time is predicated on assumptions about growing the trees involved over decades. He suggested that a workable solution might involve air-sourced heat pumps with a pellet-burner backup.

Via Zoom, Eric Miller, who has a background in air pollution research, said pellets accelerate local air pollution impacts in the short term, which is of particular concern given that the village's location is prone to temperature inversions, which tend to trap air near the ground. He understands it may be necessary to replace the oil burner in the interim and that that might serve well as a backup system in the longer term as well. He favors the adoption of a heat pump system in the end, but the costs should be well specified before any proposal is put before the voters.

Paul Manganiello spoke against pellets, saying the entire life cycle must be considered for the growing, harvesting, and transportation of the wood involved, and that any solution will have HVAC implications regardless of the heat source involved.

Dan Goulet added via Zoom, "This is a fine mess you've got yourselves into, ladies." He went on to say he doesn't understand how geothermal heating could work with soil so cold and that the likely need for an easement from the church next door should be considered. He said it should be borne in mind that pellets are made from waste wood and he personally loves his stove.

Via Zoom, Mary Gorman chimed in to say there's "no such thing as clean energy," since every system has negative implications. She said the Town should seriously evaluate its needs for building space long term and how they may be affected by the trend toward a hybrid workforce in which work time is split between home and office.

After a quick Google, Arnold reported that the Kilton Library has 12 wells to satisfy its needs for heating and cooling but has a pellet boiler in reserve.

Layton posed the question of how "mini-splits" might figure into plans for Tracy Hall, which enable heating and cooling on a very localized basis. Calloway wondered if one might work well as an interim solution to address the needs of the Town Clerk's offices in particular.

Smith moved, seconded by Vincent, to authorize up to \$200,000 to purchase the pellet boiler system as proposed by Lyme Green Heat and take the funds from the Emergency and Unanticipated Reserve Fund because this has reached emergency status. Vincent, Smith, Yes; Arnold, Calloway, Layton, No. **Motion Failed.**

Cushman asked what the plan might be for pellet storage and what volume of pellets might be required and what their cost might be over the next twenty-five years. In response, Vincent noted that no one had similarly asked what would be the expense for electricity over the life of a heat-pump system and wondered if it was being assumed that such needs would be met entirely from renewable sources. Arnold replied that the best application likely would involve investment in solar power as well.

Smith reminded that a previous Board had refused to place her proposal for solar power investments on a town meeting warrant.

Pond suggested modifying the motion to say "look into" rather than making a commitment to spend.

Layton objected that instead of what was proposed in the motion, what was needed was a "smaller intervention just to get through the winter." Kewer asked whether a pellet boiler really could be deployed in time for the coming winter. Vincent and Smith assured that that is what they have been told. Via Zoom, Kris Clement wondered if the question necessarily must be posed as an either/or situation and whether a smaller pellet-burning unit couldn't be sufficient to replace the failed oil burner.

Duffy recommended the Board stay the course and wait for any responses to the current RFP, due within a week and a half. He would welcome the expertise of a consultant regarding mini-splits, for example, which he himself does not possess.

Smith asked Duffy when a contingency plan for a heating crisis in Tracy Hall will be available. He responded that a key element of the plan would be to use the Health & Safety building's community room on an emergency basis, while another would be for many employees to work from home. He also said the records in the Town Clerk's offices, including the vault, need not be made available upon request, but rather within three days, as specified by statute. He averred it was certainly not necessary to rent any offices in advance, considering the more than sufficient stock of commercial-grade space available already for the foreseeable future. Smith asked for a plan in writing.

Charlotte Metcalf on Zoom said it would be a shame if the Town's operations had to be moved simply because the Board was unwilling to replace the non-functioning boiler.

Arnold moved to adjourn but did not immediately receive a second.

Layton moved, seconded by Calloway, to replace one oil burner in Tracy Hall. Vincent, Arnold, and Smith, No; Calloway and Layton, Yes. **Motion Failed.**

By consensus, it was decided to schedule a special meeting for the week after the next regular meeting, which will be on the twenty-fourth, by which date the response to the RFP should be known.

Adjournment. Arnold, concluding by saying he draws "inspiration" from the fact the Town so clearly backs the goals outlined in Article 36, again moved to adjourn, this time seconded by Layton. **Passed Unanimously.**

Meeting Adjourned: 9:11 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Ralph C. Hybels
Minutes Taker

Approved by the Selectboard on

Marcia Calloway, Selectboard Chair

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