

Norwich Solid Waste Committee, draft minutes of March 17, 2021 special meeting

Meeting topic: renewal of solid waste service agreement between Norwich and Casella

Meeting held on Zoom SB account, recorded, called to order at 7:05 p.m. by committee chair Jack Cushman. Minutes by Cushman.

Also attending, committee members Alex Thorngren and Andy Scherer; select board member Claudette Brochu; town manager Herb Durfee; and Neil Fulton, representing Upper Valley waste management district.

Cushman noted the limited purpose of this special meeting, and that any decision or recommendation would require unanimous vote of committee members present, and noted per the agenda that approval of 3/11 draft minutes, which have been posted, would await the next regularly scheduled meeting on Thursday, April 8. Town clerk has arranged for a regular Zoom meeting for the committee on second Thursday of each month.

Cushman noted that this meeting was being held at suggestion of Brochu because the service agreement with Casella expires at the end of March and is due for renewal on April 1; the committee should learn details and discuss the subject before signing, and might have a recommendation. Durfee confirmed that the draft service agreement in the committee packet was due for renewal as described.

Cushman asked Durfee if there was anything unusual in the contract. Durfee said that it was a "standard contract" that did not deviate from past practice. He reported "no issues with Casella" in performance other than routine experiences such as new drivers needing some instruction and the recently experienced freezing of organic and food waste in bins on coldest winter days. He noted that the volume of recycling in Norwich has been "exceeding expectations."

Fulton agreed with Durfee that the pending contract is not out of the ordinary. He noted that an opportunity in the future to rebid the contract competitively might help hold costs down.

Durfee and Fulton described experiences in various towns and noted that each town is different and developments including changes in recycling laws are affecting demand for services.

Durfee explained that while the draft agreement contemplates a multi-year extension it allows for two one-year extensions with the agreement of both parties.

Committee members and other participants briefly discussed the kinds of issues the committee would want to study if a one-year extension of the service agreement provided a window for improvements.

For example, Thorngren noted that in terms of rising costs, "the real issue is volume" -- in other words, steps taken to reduce household generation of solid waste could help hold down costs.

Scherer asked “how do we make our recyclables more valuable?” And Durfee noted that we do get income back from recycling and that this is tracked via the monthly invoice system. Durfee noted that installation of a scale to weigh solid waste streams could save residents and the town money if it allowed service charges to be assessed on the basis of weigh rather than volume. Cushman noted that issues like this are worthy of discussion in the future even though they do not directly bear on the imminent renewal of the contract; the committee is going to be focusing on public education, discussion, transparency and consensus as it examines alternatives in the coming months.

Durfee’s evaluation of our performance was “the town is good about recycling; is there room for improvement? Probably.” The committee will be looking over new numbers produced by the town manager showing revenues and expenditures involving the Transfer Station; Durfee said while numbers are shifting, income and spending are being held in a pretty good balance as compared to some other kinds of town services. Information on costs and income were received too late for inclusion in packet for this meeting and will be included in next packet and discussed in future meetings after notification on a future agenda.

The consensus emerged from the discussion that all participants favored an attempt by the Town Manager to seek a one-year renewal of the draft service agreement, opening a window for the town to carefully think through any changes that might improve performance, including the possibility of a competitive bid / request for proposals (RFP) in time for the next renewal opportunity in March 2022.

Cushman noted this consensus, and asked if it was advisable or necessary for the committee to make a recommendation either to the Select Board or to the Town Manager. Brochu thought a committee recommendation to the Town Manager would be appropriate.

Cushman offered a motion: The Solid Waste Committee advises the town manager to seek a one year renewal of the services agreement with the town’s solid waste contractor, giving the committee and the town time to consider a competitive bid, RFP or other changes in practice..

Seconded by Scherer and approved unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at approximately 7:50 pm.

Draft minutes respectfully submitted by Cushman, subject to revision at regular meeting on 4/8