

TOWN OF WEATHERSFIELD, VERMONT

SELECT BOARD

Select Board

Martin Memorial Hall
5259 Route 5, Ascutney VT
Monday, December 10, 2018
7:00 PM

REGULAR MEETING

MINUTES

APPROVED 1/7/2019

Select Board Members Present: N. John Arrison (arrived at 6:18 PM)
C. Peter Cole
Tom Leach
Kelly Murphy

Select Board Members Absent: Daniel Boyer

Ed Morris, Town Manager

Others Present:

Darrin Spaulding	Sue Brown	David Picknell	Josh Compo
Terri (?)	Steve Brown	Tracy Dauphin	Travis Compo
Colby Hodgdon	Caroline Taylor	Mychael Spaulding	Nicholas J. Koloski
Tim Austin	Jeff Epstein	Ray Stapleton	
Josh Dauphin	Mark Johnson	Ernest Shand	

1. Call to Order

Ms. Murphy called the meeting to order at 6:05PM. The first item to be discussed was an overview of the fire budget.

The Select Board had reviewed the budget at the December 3rd meeting. While it had not been finalized, it was presented for discussion.

Mr. Morris gave a generalized summary of the budget. He drew attention to the Tax Need for each version of the budget – Fire Commission vs Municipal Department. The tax need for the Fire Commission budget is \$179, 887. The Municipal budget with a full time fire chief is \$244,270. Both of these fall under the General Fund.

General Fund with municipal department: \$1,424,436; current tax rate of \$0.330 compared to last year's \$0.3268 or about a half-penny more.

General Fund with Fire Commission: \$1,344,556; tax rate \$0.3117; a little over a penny (1 ½) less than what we were paying last year.

The select board will need to decide which budget will be put forward.

TOWN OF WEATHERSFIELD, VERMONT

SELECT BOARD

Ms. Murphy called for questions. She said there has been a lot of chatter out in the community about a “sky high” tax rate with a municipal fire department. These budgets show fairly solid numbers of what the cost would actually be.

There were a few questions raised about office expenses and insurances. During the discussion it became apparent that a line-for-line comparison between the two versions of the budget wasn't possible as they were being presented. Mr. Morris said they would work on clearing that up for the next draft so that comparisons could be made more easily.

(Mr. Arrison arrives at 6:18 PM.)

Ms. Murphy then asked to move the discussion to the list of Fire Chief responsibilities. The posted list showed all of the tasks that participants had felt a full time fire chief should perform. Ms. Murphy asked if there was anything that should be added. When nothing was added, Ms. Murphy asked those present to go through the list and decide which tasks could be eliminated for a part time chief. (She said a full time chief means 40 hours a week; a part time chief means 20 hours a week.)

- NFRS stats keeping – PT
- Fire Training for the Chief – PT
- Fire Investigation – PT (required by state statute)
- Meetings (previously listed) – PT
- Respond to emergency calls, Be the chief - PT 500 calls; goo share are medical
- Future Water Supply Plans – PT

Mr. Shand said things change in this discussion if the fire chief is able to delegate some of these responsibilities.

- (Emergency) Pre-Planning – PT

Chief Spaulding said this task could be delegated, but then the Town would be obligated to start paying those to whom the tasks are delegated. Ms. Murphy said, even with a full-time chief, tasks will have to be delegated, as there is no way all of these tasks could be completed by one person.

- Community Outreach – PT

The question was asked if all of these tasks would be done every week throughout the year. Ms. Murphy said absolutely not. However, the responsibilities lie with the chief. And while it may be desirable for a part-time chief to perform the full list of tasks, it is not reality. She repeated the question – which of these tasks would the town give up in order to have a part-time chief.

TOWN OF WEATHERSFIELD, VERMONT

SELECT BOARD

Mychael Spaulding said he didn't think any of the tasks could be sacrificed if the Town is to be fully served. Ms. Murphy said that was the point of the exercise – to demonstrate that a full time chief may be necessary – that the responsibilities are too numerous for a part-time chief or a volunteer who may already have a full-time job elsewhere.

The question was then asked, “Why are we even doing this? Why aren't we keeping the separate ones? Why do we need one full-time chief? Aren't Josh and Darrin doing this themselves?” Ms. Murphy asked the chiefs to respond to the question.

Chief Dauphin said he had a full-time job and probably only half of the listed tasks are getting done “accurately and the correct way”. As to delegating, he said the members of both departments are “stressed”. “There are duties now that are just barely being met as line officers themselves. To put more onto them for a volunteer chief, “It's not happening. If we are truly being honest with each other, it is not happening.” He said this is why he and his department asked to have this reviewed and to start this process.

Chief Spaulding said there were 6-8 tasks that are not being done. Everything else they do the best they can with.

Tim Austin said the state keeps mandating more and more training that they must complete on their own time without compensation and it becomes too great a burden for volunteers who have jobs of their own and families. It is becoming more difficult to find people to serve as volunteer firefighters.

Ms. Murphy said she hears chatter in the community about the select board “being on some sort of a power-trip – to take over the fire services, which is so far from the truth.” She said the select board has enough to do already. She said this ball started rolling when WWVFD came to the board and asked the board to look into what a municipal fire department might look like. “At no point were we looking to do this.” She acknowledged that the idea had been bantered around for many years, but it was just talk, until WWVFD came forward and said “please look into this”. It became the select board's responsibility at that point. That was when the board asked Mr. Morris to do a study on what it would look like. These conversations are necessary to make it work – the board will not do this on its own. That is why we are here. Every step of the way is very transparent and very inclusive so that by Town Meeting, the process will have culminated in a transparent and inclusive decision.

Mr. Austin said the community may not have an accurate idea of the number of calls to which the departments respond each year. Chief Dauphin estimated his department

TOWN OF WEATHERSFIELD, VERMONT

SELECT BOARD

responded to 135 calls last year, half of which were medical. Chief Spaulding estimated 380 calls for AVFD.

The question was asked if the two current chiefs coordinate now to accomplish the list of tasks or do they try to do it all independently. Ms. Murphy asked the chiefs to respond to this question with complete honesty. Chief Spaulding talked about run cards, lists of equipment, pre-plan, not reinventing the wheel, building on what everybody else is doing “on this side of the river”.

The question was asked, “If Darrin is only short 6 or 8, do we need a full time fire chief to get that done?” He said any new chief would inherit the same problems.

Josh Compo said that part of the reason this is being explored is because the two departments “have not gotten along for years. There's always been concerns, there's always been drama. This is not a good thing. Quite frankly, the select board has actually dodged taking up this conversation for years.” He said the John Woods report was a good thing, but we haven't really acted on it until now. He said part of the reason we are here – (a) people are now putting in too many hours and (b) the fire departments don't get along.

Ms. Murphy said a single fire chief with a single department could solve some of this.

It was suggested that maybe a mediator was needed. It was stated that the Fire Commission – which was created to and charged with mediating - has failed to achieve results for 20 years.

Ray Stapleton said currently there are two departments with two sets of SOGs and all the equipment that's needed to run each department. Two sets of reports are generated for calls. Each side is doing grants. Each has their own pre-plans. One chief with one department will resolve all those issues.

Chief Dauphin said, “The way it's been is exactly why we're here. Neither department can get along. We've had a fire commission since 1991 that's supposed to help the two departments and that still has failed. So we go this route we have one person that's in charge...it solves a lot of issues.”

Mr. Leach said a municipal department would be held to professional standards. There are real-life safety issues going on at the scenes that he has witnessed that are due to lack of training and lack of manpower. He said we have been lucky that no one has been hurt or that we have not destroyed expensive equipment, though it has come very close. It goes far beyond each side not getting along with the other.

Mr. Arrison said the crabbing flies back and forth and quite often falls in the Town Manager's lap or the select board's lap and there's absolutely nothing the board or the manager can do about it. They can only control the funding. A municipal chief would have to answer to the manager just as the police chief does.

TOWN OF WEATHERSFIELD, VERMONT

SELECT BOARD

Mr. Morris said he has spent many hours trying to work through issues with the departments. In his opinion, having a single department with a single chief who is responsible to the town is the right direction in which to go.

Nick Koloski said that over the course of 25 years, a lot of volunteers have left because of the discord between the departments.

Ms. Murphy said this conversation needs to be carried out into the community – to explain what has been and is going on. However, if the town chooses not to create a municipal department, then everything that has just been described becomes status quo – again. There has to be some kind of solution. We have a potential solution. And even though we have issues with the budget, when we look at the numbers, it brings her great relief. When she is approached by an elderly person who is upset because they don't know how they will cope with a skyrocketing tax rate and this is really not the case – unfortunately they will not listen to the select board or only marginally. The fire departments have to speak about this as they have just been doing. It is important for the departments to communicate this message.

At Town Meeting we will have voters who did not watch the SAPA TV coverage nor read the reports and will come in thinking the select board is trying to do something that it really isn't intending to do.

Mr. Austin said that unfortunately we live in an era of scare tactics.

Ms. Murphy thanked the Eagle Times for its accurate reporting of these discussions.

Colby Hodgdon asked if tasks are delegated will officers be subsidized or will that still be voluntary? There was no clear answer to the question.

Mr. Hodgdon asked how the board could ask the town for a penny and a half on the tax rate this year and then next year go back and ask for more. How will you tell the voters that this is it – this is all that's needed? Ms. Murphy said we can't know all the answers at this point.

Mr. Hodgdon asked what if the chief delegates and the volunteers stop showing up because it's too much? Then everything falls back on the chief. The chief gets upset. Then he goes back to the town and says he needs more money and he gets turned down.

Mr. Morris acknowledged there are a number of unknowns, but the scenario Mr. Hodgdon just described is no different than any other department in town. Every year there are new guidelines and standards and departments have to adjust and find efficiencies to cope with the changes and balance the tax rate. It would be the same on the fire side. It would be up to the manager and the chief to figure it out.

TOWN OF WEATHERSFIELD, VERMONT

SELECT BOARD

Chief Spaulding said we'd need all our ducks in a row so the new chief won't fail; when he starts delegating and people turn him down because he is getting paid and they are not. He said there should be money set aside for whoever he delegates tasks to so they can be paid. He asked if there was money in the budget to cover this.

Mr. Arrison said he would like to see a part-time chief with paid on-call firefighters. He said the board was under the gun because the budget has to be finalized in just a few weeks.

Chief Dauphin said the list of tasks should be prioritized so the new chief doesn't try to complete them all in his first year.

Ms. Murphy said that the chief can delegate, but the responsibilities still belong to the chief, whether he is part time or full time.

Mr. Morris said the new chief would be unlikely to delegate tasks in his first year because he would want to learn the job first. A part time chief will have to work full time until he learns the job completely.

Mr. Austin said it would be unrealistic to expect the new chief to solve 40 years of problems overnight.

Chief Dauphin said there used to be a waiting list of people wanting to join the department. This number has declined in the last ten years, yet the amount of work required has tripled and is falling on a much smaller number of people.

Ms. Murphy said that having a chief will allow firefighters to do what they love to do most – train and fight fires.

Ms. Murphy returned to the list of tasks and repeated the question, which of these tasks would a part time chief not have to do?

Mr. Compo said the part time chief could eliminate fire commission and select board meetings.

Mr. Morris said he wouldn't expect a part time or volunteer chief to do Building Inspection, rentals, or health officer – maybe not even a full time until they are settled in.

Mr. Leach said a part time chief probably wouldn't be able to do hydrant testing and maintenance.

- Fire Code Enforcement + Inspections – not PT

TOWN OF WEATHERSFIELD, VERMONT

SELECT BOARD

- Emergency Management + Plan Creation and Management – PT or V limited
- Safety Classes for Public – Not PT
- Fire Warden – Not PT
- They would work on reduction of duplicate equipment- not PT; this is a one-time task

The question was raised, what if Ascutney doesn't come on board? Ms. Murphy said the board did not yet know.

Chief Spaulding asked about fund raising – will the departments still have to fund raise? Ms. Murphy asked Chief Dauphin what his department would do. He said an auxiliary could fund raise if they chose to for a special piece of equipment or extras. It would not be necessary for operating expenses. Ms. Murphy said the goal is to take this burden off of the volunteers. Mr. Morris said he had built the budget so that fund raising was not part of the operational budget.

Mr. Compo asked why AVFD thinks this is a bad idea. Chief Spaulding asked to table this until Mark Girard could be present to answer the question.

Ms. Murphy said the board was moving forward with WWVFD and its assets. AVFD hasn't presented anything to counter that.

At the first meeting in January (1//7/2018), the hour dedicated to this discussion will be focused on AVFD – if they wish to contract with the town, they need to get the draft contract to the office in time for the board packets. They will need to answer, “What will make this work? What are the sticking points?” Ms. Murphy said that she didn't want to come up with a Plan B – she preferred to have AVFD come on board and move forward. In her mind, the community has paid for everything in each station.

The discussion again turned to problems with waning volunteer numbers and the drama that has driven them away.

One additional task was added to the list of chief responsibilities - “responsibility to write NFPA pre-plan for cancer prevention”.

Mr. Koloski asked to add “response plan for members that's geographically mindful”.

At 7:54, Ms. Murphy called for the meeting to end, with the discussion to continue on January 7th.

The meeting adjourned at 7:54 PM

TOWN OF WEATHERSFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD

Respectfully submitted,
deForest Bearse

WEATHERSFIELD SELECTBOARD

N. John Arrison, Selector

Daniel E. Boyer, Selector

C. Peter Cole, Vice-Chairperson

Tom Leach, Clerk

Kelly Murphy, Chairperson