

JOHNSON SELECTBOARD MEETING MINUTES
OLD TOWN MEETING HOUSE, LOWE LECTURE HALL (6:00 – 6:30)
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING (6:40)
FRIDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2025

Present: Selectboard members: Mike Dunham, Peter Hammond, Adrienne Parker, Eben Patch, Paul Warden

Others: Tom Galinat, Kyle Nuse, Doug Molde, Linda Molde, David Williams, Peggy Williams, George Pearlman, Hope Sullivan, Eric Osgood, Diana Osborn, Lois Frey, Sue Lovering, Greg Tatro, Scott Meyer, Noel Dodge, Mark Woodward, Jesse Whitworth, Cynthia Hennard, Bruce Lyon, Beth Foy (remote), Joy Novakowski, Colin Bradley, several other people

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. *Site Visit of Old Town Meeting House, Lowe Lecture Hall*

Selectboard members, the town administrator and interested members of the public visited the Lowe Lecture Hall.

2. *Call Informational Meeting to Order*

Eben called the meeting to order at 6:40 at the Johnson Municipal Building.

3. *Additions or Adjustments to the Agenda*

Eben said acceptance of a resignation would be added to the end of the agenda.

4. *Informational Discussion and Presentation on Old Town Meeting House, Lowe Lecture Hall*

Adrienne presented information on the history of the building. It was built in 1832 as a Congregational Church. It was gifted to the town in 1854. In 1899 it was renovated with a stage. Afterwards, it hosted school plays, graduations, grange meetings, shows and movies. In 1984 it was leased by the Vermont Studio Center (VSC.) In 1998 VSC purchased it from the town. There was a deed restriction giving right of first refusal to the town, meaning that if VSC decided to sell the building they would need to come to the town first to see if the town wanted to purchase it. The tower weathervane remains town property.

VSC executive director Hope Sullivan said VSC has used the building for 3 seasons out of the year. Over time they have been using it less and less. It has been underutilized. Since the 2023 flooding they have had other priorities. The board of directors discussed what to do with the building and realized it did not have a large programmatic role so they offered it to the town. They would love to see it stay in the community.

Adrienne said VSC first came to the selectboard in February 2025. In July they shared firm plans to sell it and the selectboard expressed interest. Potential pricing was discussed and it was agreed that VSC would sell it to the town for a dollar plus \$7,090.78 (the amount of 2025 town and village taxes) and \$3000 in closing costs. The selectboard decided to get the opinion of voters on whether to acquire it.

There is a broad list of potential uses. If the town acquired the building the selectboard would create a committee or task force to research the best community use. What the community wants would determine its use. Potential uses include community event space, cultural programming, education, health and wellness, childcare, senior programs, office or meeting space for local organizations, shared workspace for entrepreneurs or makers, tourism/heritage or a relief distribution site during disasters.

Eben reviewed financial information. Total acquisition costs would be about \$10,092. The cost for a structural evaluation by an architect, as recommended in a building inspection the town had done, would be \$500. Foundation repair is needed relatively urgently. The town has a verbal quote of \$150,000 for that. An electrical panel needs to be relocated and the town has a verbal quote of \$4,000 for that.

The loss in revenue (taxes VSC paid) would be \$2,297.55 annually. The water/sewer bill currently is \$539.12 per year but the water is off most of the time. The electrical bill is \$1,028.21 annually. The total yearly cost if we left the water off and used the building sparingly would be about \$3,864.88.

Eben used Holcomb House figures as a rough estimate of potential annual costs. The loss in tax revenue would be the same. The water/sewer bill for Holcomb House is \$776.65 per year. The electrical bill is \$1,298.99. Heat is \$4,609.56. The telephone/internet bill is \$1,433.02. Mowing and plowing are estimated at \$1,000 each. Building maintenance is estimated at \$2,500 and Eben included an estimated \$2,000 in miscellaneous expenses. The total potential yearly cost is estimated to be \$16,915.76.

One cent on our current grand list raises \$24,465.45 so if utility costs are similar to those at Holcomb House, there would be less than a penny increase in the tax rate yearly. The \$16K figure does not include foundation work or acquisition costs.

Adrienne showed a list of potential grant opportunities. If the building were owned by the town it would be eligible for a lot of grants. There is also the possibility of public funding opportunities.

Adrienne said the building has historic value. It is one of Johnson's most significant historical buildings. It has served as a community space and it could support culture, art or whatever the town residents would like. If the town owns it, then the town, not outside groups, will decide its use. Town ownership opens access to major preservation and community grants. Adrienne said she thinks the building would be something that could really add to our community.

Adrienne read the article that will be voted on. The vote is advisory and nonbinding. The selectboard's intent is to follow the will of the voters, but the selectboard believes it is prudent to reserve the right to make the final determination to protect the town's interests in the event of unforeseen circumstances and/or new information. There will be a special town meeting on October 28. At the meeting there will be a floor vote on the article. If it is approved, the legal transfer process will begin. Then a community planning process can begin.

Cynthia Hennard asked, is the foundation so bad that we can't wait for a grant to fix it? And who do we have that can pursue grants? Tom said the state fire marshal said that before the building could be open for public use we would need a structural engineer to make a determination. If the determination is that the building would be condemned as is, then the foundation work is needed. The quote was for foundation work on 3 sides of the building. It includes a perimeter drain. When foundation work was done before there were no drains on Main St. Now we can bring water to the street. The quote that includes foundation work also

includes putting in parking along the left side of the building, regrading in the front, removal of trees, and replacement of stairs. Tom doesn't think there is an immediate rush to work on the foundation. It looks like the corners of the building have not moved. Peter said some grant sources could cover all or part of that expense. Eben said right now we have an interim community and economic development specialist and we will begin looking for a new one soon. The Lamoille County Planning Commission is often a resource for the town with regard to seeking grants. We also have the town administrator.

Bruce Lyon asked about a hazardous material assessment. He said the cost could be astronomical if asbestos or lead is found. He also asked where people will park. Eben said the board talked at length about having all the hazardous materials assessed and decided just to do a building inspection. We would probably have a hazardous materials assessment done before purchase. Parking is a difficult issue. Probably we would lean on experts like LCPC to come up with options. Adrienne said parking will be added on one side. Tom said we will add 6-8 estimated spaces.

There was a question about how the building is heated and whether it would be heated in winter. Eben said there is not a full plan yet for use of the building. There is a good chance we could turn the heat on for events in winter. Paul said he thinks the expectation is that initially the building would be used intermittently and not heated all the time.

Jesse Whitworth said he saw in the inspection report that the oil furnace didn't have a recent inspection and hadn't been serviced. Was it working? Hope said yes. Tom said it was on tonight.

Jesse asked what has changed about VSC's need for the building. Hope said in 1998 VSC had double or triple the number of visiting writers and artists they have now. That is the main programmatic change affecting their needs. There are also issues with accessibility, sound, etc.

Scott Meyer said he is somewhat in favor of getting the building, but he looked at it today and saw that the sill is wet and rotted. In the seating area, the floor bounced. That is a little bit of a red flag. What happens if the review isn't done by the time the town wants to sign the paperwork? Holcomb House looked like a good idea but it has turned into something of a money pit. He doesn't want that to happen again. Eben said the inspection report does talk about rot in the sill plate and other things like lead paint and no GFCI in the bathroom. We don't have costs for every item.

Scott asked about ADA compliance. George Pearlman said the building is ADA compliant. There is parking in back and a ramp. Everything inside is ADA compliant. Tom said the architects said the second floor balcony, with a single exit and a railing, would be allowable if sprinklered.

Jesse Whitworth said he encourages everyone to look at the inspection report on the town website. The sill rot was termed superficial. They didn't have concerns about it. The building has stood for 200 years and it appears the foundation hasn't moved significantly.

George Pearlman said everything except the foundation in that building has been rebuilt – the windows, the tower, the floors. New roofs were put on.

Beth Foy said it is a beautiful building. VSC has taken care of a lot of beautiful buildings in Johnson and made them better. It is important to set the full context, though. She has questions about how the acquisition fits into the bigger picture. How many properties and structures does the town currently own that have some planned development or maintenance need? How many of those projects are in progress or outstanding? Eben said the Holcomb House needs work. The library is being worked on. Work is needed at the municipal building. There is no needed work at the town garage, though the MERP grant hopefully will bring energy savings. The pavilion at the soccer fields is in good shape. The rail trail building is in good shape. It is getting more work done but the money has already been allocated. Beth said there are also the mill house and the Jewett property. That is a lot. She worries about the capacity of the town to manage this many projects even if we have funding. Does the town have capacity? Eben asked board members how they feel about that.

Paul said that is a good question. When you start something new you don't really know the answer. The board would lean heavily on citizen input. There would be a task force or committee leading the charge. It would require a whole village effort. Mike said he thinks the board could handle almost anything but after March he won't have to worry about it. Eben said it is a good question, with the pending departure of Rosemary, the town looking for a community and economic development specialist and other news that will come up later. He doesn't think the town would do anything with the building right off the bat. He thinks we acquire it and wait until there is capacity to handle it. Adrienne said she agrees that there are a lot of things going on but she thinks we can handle it. We have an interim CEDS. She would like to see that role expanded a bit and hopefully with a new person we would have a lot of grant opportunities come in. She thinks it is possible to deal with the building. The opportunity is now. If we don't want it now, the opportunity won't come again. The building might sit for a bit until we figure out what to do with it. Peter said he thinks when we appoint a task force and figure out what we want to do with the building, management of the building can be part of that. We can make a plan for who will manage it. It might depend greatly on what it is used for. There could be another group managing events that would have a role in managing the property. Adrienne said maybe we will want something bigger and more elaborate eventually, but it can be something more low maintenance and easier to manage before then.

Beth said she can see a lot of potential use for the building but she worries about where we are as a town. If you have many priorities, you don't have any priorities. It is important to know what your priorities are. She likes the idea of preserving the building, but the town doesn't have to be part of that. VSC could write something about historic preservation in the deed.

Diana Osborn said she has seen headlines in the paper about community trusts that have been involved with the Elmore Store and the Wolcott Forest. That seems like a viable alternative for approaching projects like this when the selectboard is spread thin. She wonders if the selectboard would consider getting the building and then transitioning to a community trust to carry out the big project. Eben said the board hasn't talked about that model. It is a very interesting model to him. Board members agreed they would consider it. Peter said we don't currently have a community trust that could receive the building, so the option now is the town.

Paul said the door is wide open on all possibilities. Maybe there is a commercial opportunity. Eben made a good point earlier that we don't have to do everything all at once.

Joy Novakowski said she works at the college. She has been looking for an opportunity to use her professional skills related to artistic event management and accessibility. There are people like her in town who are very excited to help with finding resources to get the Lowe Lecture Hall going. It could bring revenue back into town. There are other towns in northeast Vermont that are successful because of theater and community spaces.

Eric Osgood asked if there are thoughts about moving the monuments back to the building if the town acquired it. Eben said citizens have brought that up. He imagines there will be a plan.

Eric said he was hoping he would hear more of a plan. He is hearing a wish and a hope. That gives him pause. The town got rid of the building because it wasn't being used and also because we could get money for it that allowed us to build the municipal building.

Greg Tatro said he feels the building should go back onto the grand list. If it is taken off the grand list, the loss of revenue and added cost for maintenance will get close to one cent on the grand list. The buyout properties will also impact taxes. Eben said the state will reimburse a portion of the taxes for buyout properties, but only for a 10 year period and only if they have enough money. They are saying they will reimburse 100% for 5 years and 50% for 5 years but he doesn't know if that includes the value of the land.

Adrienne said she likes hearing the historical context that the town owned the building and sold it to VSC. It went to a Johnson business and now it can come back to Johnson. She would hope that if the town didn't buy it it would still go to a Johnson business again, but what if it went to a non-resident and the control and connection to Johnson wasn't there?

Cynthia Hennard said the new library addition will have community space, but she doesn't have sense of how big or how accessible it will be. Would this building be a duplication of space or would the library space already be very much used and not available for the kinds of possibilities that have been discussed? Tom said the community space at the library is only a small area in the old building. It is not good for large gatherings.

Colin Bradley said he started a nature school program in Johnson. He could potentially do something like an after school theater program in the building. It would be great if the town could get it and not sink money into it right away. We could see if we can do a community trust or maybe it lease it to someone. It would be great if we could get it, sell it, and get cash to build a new building.

Jesse asked, the town sold the property to VSC and built the municipal building with the proceeds? George Pearlman said that building was condemned. It was in bad disrepair. VSC bought it and also the old town clerk's office and that gave the town enough money to build the municipal building.

Greg Tatro said for him it is about capacity. He doesn't think the town has made a lot of progress on the Jewett property. A lot of people in town had a dream to do something

productive for the town there. The town has things to fix and finish before they take on another project. The industrial park project is big and he hasn't seen much progress. Eben said he believes full notice to proceed is coming shortly for the industrial park project. We plan to do logging this winter. The idea is to break ground in the spring. Hopefully we will have it out to bid in December. Greg said he didn't know about that progress.

Tom said there were more unknowns 6 months ago. But now the Lendway Lane project is done. The library project is hopefully going out to bid Monday. The industrial park project is waiting on Act 250. The biggest concern is that we have to log before April 15. Once we get Act 250 approval we can get the property cleared. If we can't do it before April 15 we have to wait until August 15. Things were stagnant when he started here, but now they are moving fast. The community came together and moved the library. Anything can happen here if the community comes behind it.

Diana Osborn suggested maybe the Lowe Lecture Hall could replace a building the town already has. She doesn't know if the Historical Society is interested in moving locations, but maybe it could replace Holcomb House. Maybe it could replace the old mill house. Maybe it would be a better location for something that is currently happening somewhere else. The idea that we don't have a definite plan for final use is an advantage rather than a liability. The only decision we need to make now is whether to acquire it. VSC has been an excellent steward. It is unselfish to gift it to the town. She is interested in hearing other reasons why people should vote against acquiring it. It seems like a clear win.

Donna Griffiths asked what one cent on the grand list means for people's taxes. Eben said the tax rate is about 91 cents, so one cent would be about a 1.1% increase. If your tax bill was \$20K, it would increase by about \$220 per year.

Lois Frey asked if there is a survey of the parcel so we know all the boundaries. George said yes. It is in the VSC office. Board members said it would also be in the records at the municipal building.

Joy Novakowski said she heard some proposals to sit on the building and wait to use it. Is the building usable in some capacity now? Tom said that would be contingent on the evaluation of a structural engineer. There are different requirements for a public building. It would have to meet a certain standard. Usage would be pending structural analysis and board approval.

George Pearlman said it has been left empty and unused for 2 or 3 years. There is nothing wrong with letting it sit. It won't affect the building.

A community member said he believes he and Tom calculated a cost to the taxpayer of \$6.60 per \$100K of property value. Tom said he will finalize that.

George said if the building is kept empty it will not cost anything. When it is time to pay for heat, etc. there could easily be some income stream to offset expenses.

Paul said the board decided not to test for lead or asbestos as that would have meant more cost. They decided to wait for those tests. George said if there ever was asbestos in the building, it is

gone. Everything has been taken down and replaced. The original windows are there, but they have been rebuilt. There might be some lead but he would say there is a slim chance.

5. ***Acceptance of Resignation***

Mike moved to accept the resignation letter from the town administrator with regrets and to wish him well in his new endeavor, Adrienne seconded and the motion was passed.

6. ***Adjourn***

The meeting was adjourned at 7:47.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths