

**TOWN OF JOHNSON
SPECIAL TOWN MEETING MINUTES**

October 28, 2025

Moderator David Williams called the meeting to order at 6:13 p.m. He read the warning.

Article 1. Will the voters authorize the Selectboard to purchase on terms and conditions agreeable to it, a +/-0.32 acre property located at 58 Lower Main East Street, currently owned by the Vermont Studio Center, Inc. and referred to as the Joe & Emily Lowe Lecture Hall for a price of \$1.00 plus Village and Town taxes in the amount of \$7,090.78 for tax year 2025, plus estimated closing cost of \$3,000.00?

Eben Patch moved the article as printed and the motion was seconded.

Eben Patch moved to allow Tom Galinat and Hope Sullivan (not Johnson voters) to address the meeting. The motion was seconded and passed by a voice vote.

Adrienne Parker presented information on the Lowe Lecture Hall. 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 selectboard decided to go to the voters to get their opinion on whether the town should buy it. The weathervane on top of the building is town property.

Hope Sullivan, executive director of the Vermont Studio Center said VSC used the building for artist talks, readings, figure drawing, etc. They used to have 70-90 events per year. Coming out of COVID they contracted their visiting artists and writers program significantly. And in the floods of July 2023 they lost a building and 4 others were significantly impacted, which required the VSC board of directors and staff to revisit the campus master plan. They came to the conclusion that they do not have a programmatic need for the Lowe Lecture Hall right now. There are so many other buildings ahead of it on the priority list that they would not be able to do the infrastructure work needed to steward it properly. The VSC board voted to try to find a community use for it as a first choice. They held meetings with community organizations and in summer 2025 they offered it to the town for \$1. They are committed to trying to have it remain part of the community. Adrienne said the purchase price the selectboard and VSC agreed to is \$1 plus about \$7,090 for village and town taxes and \$3K in closing costs.

Adrienne said there are a lot of potential uses for the building, but it is important to the selectboard that they not decide on its use. If the town does purchase it, the selectboard would appoint a temporary committee or task force to decide on how to use it. 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. It doesn't have to be used for just one thing. There could be more than one use. It could be a free resource for residents or it could generate town revenue. Other towns have done similar initiatives, like the Civic Standard in Hardwick. In Belvidere, the town recently purchased the elementary school and they are turning it into a community space. This is being

done by a community trust. Money is funneled through the trust instead of the town. It is up to voters whether we want this building and what it would be.

Eben Patch reviewed financial information. He said the numbers in his presentation are estimates and examples of possible costs. We don't know the use of the building yet. Total acquisition costs would be about \$10,092. We have been told we should have a structural evaluation done at an estimated cost of \$500. A building evaluation was done but when the selectboard heard how much a hazardous materials assessment would cost they opted to wait until after the vote on acquisition. The town has a verbal quote of \$150,000 for foundation repair, drainage and parking. An electrical panel needs to be moved from the bathroom to be up to code. That is estimated to cost about \$4K.

Eben showed two examples of possible annual maintenance costs. One is based on current conditions. The loss in town tax revenue would be \$2,297.55 annually. The water/sewer bill currently is \$539.12 per year but the water is shut off. The electrical bill is \$1,028.21 annually. It is low now because there is not much use. If town acquired the building and did nothing with it other than maybe some occasional use, the expected costs would be similar to these current costs.

Another cost estimate is based on Holcomb House expenses. The Holcomb House is a relatively comparable building. Eben showed yearly water/sewer, electric, heat and telephone/internet costs for Holcomb House. The estimated annual costs for mowing and plowing are each \$1000. Building maintenance is estimated at \$2,500 and Eben included an estimated \$2,000 in miscellaneous expenses. The total potential yearly impact to taxes is estimated to be \$16,915.76.

For the 2025-26 grand list, one cent raises about \$24K. If annual costs were less than that, it would raise taxes by less than a penny. With an annual cost of \$16,915.76, the additional tax burden would be \$6.96 per \$100K in parcel value, \$13.92 per \$200K in parcel value or \$20.88 per \$300K. That is roughly 18% of the increase town taxpayers saw in taxes for the last tax year.

Adrienne said if the town purchased the building we would be eligible for a wide range of different grants – more grants than would be possible if it were owned by a business. She thinks the town would even be eligible for more grants than VSC was. She listed some of the possible grants. We would not automatically get these grants. We would have to compete for them. We could also go after public funding and donations.

This is one of the most significant historical buildings in Johnson. It has a long history of being owned by the town. It has history as a community space. Keeping that intact is important to some. It could bring future uses. It could support culture and art. Purchasing it keeps it under local control. The town decides its use. Town ownership opens access to preservation and community grants.

Adrienne read the article to be voted on. A note on the warning states that the vote is advisory and non-binding. The selectboard intends to follow the will of the voters, but believes it prudent to reserve the right to make the final determination to protect the town's interest if there are unforeseen circumstances and/or new information becomes available. Adrienne said, for instance, if the town did a major inspection of the building after the vote and found something really undesirable about it, the selectboard could go against the voters and not purchase it.

Eric Osgood said when the selectboard decided to bring the question of acquisition to voters, they did not have the inspection report information that was just received in the last few days. He is guessing

that the board has not had an opportunity to talk as a board about the report but he would like to ask individual board members to speak about whether the report changes their mind.

Mike Dunham said in a perfect world we would have had the inspection report long ago and would have been able to come up with a plan for the building and line up grants. He believes grants are difficult to obtain today. There are some we can hope to get. There are a lot of unknowns. Voters will have to make their own decision.

Peter Hammond said he has been operating under the assumption all along that if we acquired the building we would not run out tomorrow and spend a lot of money on it. We would take it a step at a time, hopefully not impacting taxes but doing fundraising and seeking grants, being able to do the work over time as we could afford it. When he looked at the inspection report, it really didn't change his thinking about what was possible. It's an old building and a lot of things need to be done, ranging from structural support to a GFCI outlet in the bathroom. A lot of people have commented to board members about the pictures of the building. One person said they are scary. When you take a close-up shot of rot on a sill, it will look scary. There is some significant work to be done. But he thinks we can do it without the building becoming a burden.

Paul Warden said he agrees with Peter. The inspection report did not change his mind substantially. It did give him some pause. The Studio Center has been a very good steward of the building and there is no immediate structural calamity. We have the luxury of time. We can let the building sit as is for the first couple of years while we plan and fund raise. If there was an immediate structural need, he would back away, but there is not. He thinks this is a great opportunity. The building has a lot of town history. It is in a strategic location. There are a lot of potential uses. He thinks this is an opportunity we should not pass up.

Adrienne said seeing the inspection report, talking more to people, hearing opinions and seeing the discourse online have just reinforced her opinion that we should get the building. She sees it as a pretty low risk purchase. She doesn't want taxes raised unjustly, but if we don't want the building anymore and it is not serving the town, we can sell it and the town will control who we sell it to. If we purchase it, we can reassess other buildings we own like Holcomb House or the old mill building. Those buildings have a lot of issues. Compared to the Lowe Lecture Hall they look like less of a community space. Maybe we would see if we wanted to put them on the market. The old mill house is right next to the rail trail. It makes sense to her to sell it to a business owner who could profit off the rail trail.

Eben said the selectboard has not had time to discuss the inspection report and come up with a plan. Seeing the inspection report did not change his mind. There are opportunities for time and community space with this purchase.

Ed Raymond asked why we have to make a decision tonight. The board hasn't had time to look over the report and make a plan. He wonders if the town can ask VSC for an extension. Tom Galinat said the terms of the deed give the town right of first refusal, with 90 days for a response. VSC already extended past that, but the time limit is in the conditions of the deed. Ed asked, the town can't go back and ask for more time?

Eric Nuse asked to hear the Historical Society's thoughts on how valuable they think this property is. Dick Simays said they haven't had any formal discussion on it.

Dean West said he questions the estimates of annual costs that might be incurred for the Lowe Lecture Hall based on comparison to Holcomb House. The two buildings are not alike. Holcomb House has 2 tenants that pay rent. There is an apartment whose tenant pays \$6K annually and the Historical Society pays about \$3700 a year in lieu of rent to cover utility costs. The costs for utilities Eben showed are not accurate because they are not being paid by the town but by the tenants. For example, the telephone bill is solely the responsibility of the Historical Society, not the town. Occupancy of the building more or less determines the use of the various utilities. He thinks if there is a tenant of the Lowe Lecture Hall, the tenant would pay his own way and some of the costs would be reduced. He doesn't know what it would be used for, but it seems like almost any use would generate some revenue to pay for that use. He used that building 60-odd years ago when he graduated from high school and when high school plays were put on there. It would sting a little if we disposed of the old town hall.

George Pearlman said he used to be the VSC director. When VSC leased the building, it had been closed since the late 1960s and it was in rough shape. They put quite a bit of money into it. They took out the plaster down to the lath, did electrical work, replaced clapboards, etc. When they bought it from the town, they also bought the town gym complex. That gave the town enough money to build a new town hall. VSC rebuilt the tower, worked with the state Division for Historic Preservation to rebuild every window, insulated the building, replaced the front steps, replaced the main roof with a standing seam roof, put in a bathroom, brought in water and sewer, put in new curtains, a sound system and a light system, and had an old backdrop they found in the building refinished and brought back.

George said VSC never used the mezzanine. Plaster is still falling off the walls there because they never fixed it, but the roof is no longer leaking. He noticed in the inspection report that it said some caps on the roof are coming off. The town could probably just contact the roofer about that. He knows the foundation needs work, but it hasn't moved (other than one stone) since VSC has owned it. There are a lot of little things mentioned in the report. He does not think there is any asbestos because everything was ripped out. As far as lead, he thinks there is lead in every building built before 1974. There probably is lead in the paint, but it has been painted multiple times since VSC has owned it, so it is pretty well covered up. He thinks the building looks really good considering its age and VSC did a really good job stewarding it.

Eben said the cost estimates Dean questioned are directly from the town report. They are accurate costs from Holcomb House. They were used as an example to provide some information. We won't have a perfect example for comparison.

Darrel Wescom said the inspection report says a lot of work needs to be done. He heard some board members saying we don't have to fix everything at once. But in the spring the board may look different. Only 3 selectboard members are needed to say that we are going to fix the whole building. His problem is that the next board could decide to fix it and raise taxes to take care of it. He also noted that no air conditioning cost was included, only heat.

Martha Leonard said this is a wonderful chance for the town to own and maintain this beautiful old building. If you go in, you will see it needs repairs. She personally doesn't want to see it become a cannabis shop or porn shop or see someone make it into 4 apartments with children living there who have no place to play. She would rather see it preserved. If it takes years, let it take years. It is a part of town history. This is a chance to get culture into town – to have a place where people could meet or see a movie or production. At this price, she thinks the town would be foolish to pass it up.

Casey Romero asked if it is known what historic preservation constraints are on the building. She assumes the exterior has to stay the same. What about the interior? Does it always have to have a stage? Does it have to keep the same interior layout? If so, apartments or a cannabis shop probably wouldn't happen. Eben said at this time the selectboard doesn't know the restrictions. That is part of the reason this is an advisory vote. If the voters advise the town to proceed, that is something we will have to find out.

Casey said she has great concern about the capacity of the municipal infrastructure we have now. In her opinion, there are gaps. We have only a part-time recreation coordinator and a part-time community and economic development person to do work tied to this question. We had a good town administrator and now we have to find another one. She would like the selectboard to consider looking at grant money or other sources to augment municipal infrastructure to oversee current as well as future needs.

Jon Gregg said it is important not to be short-sighted. Several selectboard members have said we don't have to spend money on the building now. The Studio Center hasn't used the building for 5 years. It could sit for 10 years and nothing would happen to it. We have no idea what the future will bring. There are a lot of unknowns. The unknowns about this building are no greater than the unknowns about everything else. It would be a shame if 50 years from now the town didn't own the building. He thinks the town should own it.

Charlie Gallanter said Casey is on point. We have a human capital issue. The money is probably the easy part, but the selectboard and town administrator have buyout properties to manage, the industrial park is not built, the library is not completed, and something is going on with Martinetti Hall. A lot of the uses proposed for Martinetti Hall have also been proposed for the Lowe Lecture Hall. It could cost \$7.5 million to accomplish some of what we want to accomplish with the Lowe Lecture Hall. We will need a new town clerk. He believes the total cost for the town administrator (including more than salary) is \$120K. The town will probably need another employee in addition to the town administrator to help. The town has right of first refusal. His understanding of that is that usually it means someone else has made an offer. Has another offer been made? The building has little parking. If there are events there, people will take up local business' parking spots, taking away their opportunity to make a living. He would hold off on approving this.

Melissa Joy Novakowski said she moved here recently. This town is so special. One of the best ways we can come to know each other is by breaking bread or joining together for live music. Tuesday Night Live was a big reason she moved here. It is in our nature to gather. We want to spend time together. When she learned she was going to be moving here, she found out who was in charge of the Lowe Lecture Hall and she talked to Hope Sullivan about it. She was curious about how the space was being used. It is a gem. She wants a safe place where people can come together if there is another disaster. She also wants to gather for jovial things like theater or after school programming. This is an interesting opportunity to her. She wants to address Casey's inquiry about human resources. She is a human resource for Johnson. She is an occupational therapist and has specialized in accessibility for buildings. She has evaluated accessibility of locations for many companies. She also has a background in event planning and marketing and in finding grant resources. She helped run a nonprofit in Massachusetts. She wants to see sustainability and resources coming back into Johnson so people are not worried about taxes going up and not being able to afford them. She is offering her skill. She is invested in this town. She has energy, time, training and motivation and she has friends in her age

group who are invested in the sustainability of Johnson. She would love to be a resource and a team member for a project that brings revenue into the town.

Kyle Nuse moved to call the question and the motion was seconded and passed by a standing vote.

Duncan Hastings called for voting to be by paper ballot. At least 7 people indicated they wanted paper ballot voting, so voting was by paper ballot. **The motion was passed 99-34, with a total of 135 people voting.**

Article 2. To do any other business that may legally come before said meeting.

It was moved and seconded to adjourn and the motion was passed by a voice vote at 8:01 p.m.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths