JOHNSON SELECTBOARD MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
MONDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2025

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Present: Selectboard members: Mike Dunham, Peter Hammond, Adrienne Parker, Eben Patch, Paul Warden
Others: Tom Galinat, Rosemary Audibert, Lois Frey, Carl Rogers, Casey Romero, Carrie Johnson (remote), Lydia Putvain, Susan Tinker (remote), Diana Osborn (remote), Sarah Henshaw (remote), Nadeau (remote), 2 other people

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. ***Call Meeting to Order***
   Eben called the meeting to order at 6:30.
2. ***Consider Additions or Adjustments to the Agenda***
   It was agreed to add an executive session and an item related to the Lowe Lecture Hall purchase.
3. ***Public Comment and Public Announcements***
   Casey Romero said it looks like we fit the criteria for a special and urgent needs grant from the Vermont Community Foundation next year for up to $5K to help restore water at the skatepark. The grant application work would probably be done in January. Casey is looking for some planning help now. Tom has said that if he has time he can meet with her next week to discuss site ideas he had for an alternative supply. Possibly there could also be help from Carl with the application or the town's role. In late December or January she will come back and ask for permission to apply for the grant. She needs help formulating a plan to go in the application. The application deadline is rolling. Tom suggested maybe it would be best to wait until around March 1 to approach the town about the project. Casey said to her the most important part is recapturing the ideas Tom previously talked about while they were at the site.
4. ***Selectboard Updates and/or Concerns***
   Paul said H.687 is a revision of Act 250. He wants to get that on the board's radar. It revises Act 250 into location-based tiers. Tiers 1A and 1B allow the town and regional planning commission to designate areas for development. In those areas, if criteria are met, there is no Act 250 review. He thinks the selectboard should be thinking about asking the planning commission to look into that. Eben suggested that Paul give them that request.

   The board agreed that Rosemary and Adrienne should be given access to Tom's and Carl's hard drives.

   Paul said we need to be thinking about the steering committee for the EPA grant. We need to think about how big it should be and whether any selectboard members should be on it. Eben said he thinks up to two selectboard members should be on it.
5. ***Appointment to Conservation Commission***
   Adrienne moved to appoint Justin Hennard-Ruth to the Conservation Commission, Peter seconded and the motion was passed.
6. ***Liquor License Approval***
   Mike moved to approve a one-time liquor license for Bookstore Mall for a reading at Johnson Woolen Mills on December 13, and the motion was seconded and passed.

7. ***Staffing Study***

Carrie Johnson reviewed the first draft of her report, which had been sent to the board. The study evaluates the adequacy and efficiency of the town's municipal staffing levels in comparison with Vermont towns of comparable population, tax rate and fiscal capacity. She found that employee roles are complementary but they aren't currently coordinated as well as they could be through a central, structured work flow. That leads to workload peaks and inconsistent cross coverage. If someone is sick or someone leaves, there will be gaps. Administrative staff operate without structured coordination tools. There should be group meetings and perhaps some informal policies. Highway staffing is fragile during storms, illnesses and emergencies. Grant activity is increasing, requiring more tracking and reporting.

She recommends adopting a hybrid administrative coordination model. As the board prepares to hire an administrator, she would recommend that more of the workflow and coordination be funneled through that office. She thinks regular joint meetings (once a month or once a quarter) would be helpful. There needs to be more coordination and more power relayed to the town administrator. She thinks the focus of the community and economic development specialist should be seeking more grants and then managing them. She doesn't know that the focus in a community this size should be as much on economic development.

Carrie said when Rosemary retires and is replaced by someone who is appointed, there are different models. The person could work next to the town administrator or work with and coordinate with the town administrator. She feels it would be good for them to work more with the town administrator instead of each doing their own thing.

She recommends hiring a fifth highway employee as soon as possible to ensure continuity in the case of illness, injuries, weather, or emergencies.

Paul said the graph on p. 5 of the report shows that Johnson has fewer miles per full-time employee than any other town she looked at, but the report says the graph supports hiring a fifth employee. Carrie said the reason for her recommendation is largely that every project the public works crew does requires more people than Johnson usually has staff for. For instance, a ditching project is supposed to have flaggers under VOSHA requirements. The severity of Johnson's weather, the need for more workers in the summer and the challenges of illness and vacation time also contributed to her recommendation. The graph does speak in the other direction but it doesn't truly depict the challenges of this community.

Mike said it is very disappointing to him that Carrie would come to the conclusion that we need a fifth public works employee. He asked if she has any other justifications that she has not shared. Carrie said no. Mike said we previously decided we needed a fifth employee for safety when working in the gravel pit, but we no longer maintain a gravel pit. Some board members feel we could get by with 4 employees. Because Carrie recommended 5, that puts us between a rock and hard place. Eben said this report doesn't force us to do anything.

Eben pointed out that some positions are erroneously shown as 50% town and 50% village when they are 100% town. That should be corrected in the final report.

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Eben said he likes the table that compares Johnson to other municipalities for population, tax rate, grand list and median household income. He would like to also see tax rates adjusted by Common Level of Appraisal. If that were done, it would put Johnson in a worse position. Hyde Park has a comparable tax rate, but our CLA is not as low as theirs.

Eben said Appendix D, showing the amount different municipalities spend on contracted services, may need a disclaimer. Some of the apparent differences between Johnson and other towns may be due to the money being allocated differently in their budgets. Rosemary said there appears to be an extra digit in one of the Hyde Park numbers. Carrie said she will call the other towns' treasurers for clarification.

Paul said it would be interesting to see a recreation budget comparison with other towns. Eben asked, all recreation or salary only? Paul said he thinks the whole budget, not just salary. Tom said Cambridge and Hyde Park don't have a recreation employee. We spend $30-40K on a recreation coordinator, but our recreation program revenue pays for much of that cost. Eben said he doesn't think it would be fair to show that Cambridge spends $30K on recreation and Johnson spends $5K when in actuality we spend $40K. Paul suggested that if possible, salaries and overall budget should be separated out. Eben suggested Carrie could also show the overall highway budget and highway salaries separately. Carrie said she doesn't know that we would want to compare how much salt or gravel we buy compared to other towns.

Carrie said she will make changes and give the board a final draft next month.

Adrienne said she would like to see the current organizational flow and a recommended flow (or more than one recommendation.)

Peter said Carrie said more tonight than what is in the draft report. He asked if she can add more of that to the next draft. Carrie said she can.

Adrienne asked if Carrie can come back on December 1 with the final draft. Carrie said that is her plan if she can get the information she needs.

8. *CEDS Update*

Carl said we got a draft conservation easement for the Prindle lot as a deer wintering area. He forwarded it to the town attorney for review. Hopefully it can be on the December 1 agenda. Luke from Mumley asked if he could have permission to send that draft to the state to fulfill an Act 250 requirement. Carl said yes after he read it and did not see anything that surprised him. It says the lot can be used for non-motorized recreation or logging that is consistent with managing the forest for wildlife habitat. The Act 250 people know it is a draft.

An RFP for consulting forester services was emailed to 29 licensed foresters. So far Carl has only received 2 replies. One bowed out and the other offered some advice and said they didn't know if they could make it to the site visit for interested foresters scheduled for November 20.

The second public meeting for the Johnson visioning project will be December 3. Carl will be on vacation. He is planning to attend the December 1 selectboard meeting remotely, but is not planning on attending the visioning meeting unless the board thinks there is a reason to.

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The rail trail committee is planning to put a kiosk and bike rack between the rail trail and the Welcome Center, in the state right of way. The state requires a lease agreement. They sent us a sample agreement and asked for some information, which Carl provided. He is now waiting for the draft Johnson lease agreement. The initial term will be 5 years and there is a possibility of 4 more 5-year extensions. The rent is $1 per year. The biggest matter to deal with is the certificate of insurance. The state wants to make sure the town sends that every year.

Carl is helping Doug Molde try to find winter storage for the materials to build two kiosks. Paul said he will talk to Doug about that. He may be able to store the materials in his barn.

Carl said he got an email from the program manager for the Recreation Economy for Rural Communities Grant. She is back to work now and will be in touch soon about next steps. The selectboard should start talking about the steering committee, maybe at the December 15 meeting. Eben said there should be a selectboard member or two. Carl said he has contacted everyone on Randall Szott's original list. A couple have said they are interested and a couple have said they are not. The vast majority haven't answered. He got a message that everyone on the recreation economy task force expressed interest in serving. Tom asked if the board would like recommendations from the recreation economy task force. Paul said yes.

9. ***Town Sewer Service Area***

Carl said he followed up with the VLCT Municipal Assistance Center to ask about the ordinance adoption process. The first step is for the board to decide to consider final adoption on a certain date. There is no public hearing required. After adoption of the ordinance, then the public must be given notice so people have a chance to circulate a petition to ask for reconsideration or a town meeting to vote on it. He made the changes to the proposed revised ordinance that were discussed last time.

Paul moved to direct that the Ordinance of the Town Of Johnson, VT Establishing the Town Sewer Service Area and Regulating Connections from the Town Sewer Service Area and Well Head Protection Sewer Service Area to the Village of Johnson Sewer System be placed on the December 1 selectboard agenda for consideration of adoption, Mike seconded and the motion was passed.

10. ***NBRC Signatory***

Carl gave board members copies of a resolution stating that Eben is the authorized official to sign documents related to the NBRC grant. The resolution is to be signed by Adrienne, since Eben is the one being appointed. **Peter moved to adopt the resolution authorizing Eben to sign documents related to the Northern Border Regional Commission grant, Adrienne seconded and the motion was passed.**

11. ***Buyout Process and TA Transition***

Sarah Henshaw of the Lamoille Area Recovery Network said closings for buyout properties are coming up and someone needs to be designated to sign for the town. There is one this week and two on December 17. It then becomes the responsibility of the town to push forward the demolition process.

Tom recommended that Rosemary or Susan represent the town at closing, which will happen in the municipal building office. **Mike moved to authorize Rosemary Audibert or Susan Tinker to sign closing documents for FEMA buyout properties, Paul seconded and the motion was passed.**

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Tom said the town has to sign off on a property inspection verifying that personal belongings have been removed and there are no hazards. He suggests Scott Meyer, the floodplain administrator, would be a good choice. He suggests Mike as a secondary signatory. **Adrienne moved to designate Scott Meyer as the primary authorized signatory for property inspections for buyouts and to designate Mike Dunham as the secondary authorized signatory, Paul seconded and the motion was passed.**

Tom said the state went out to bid for statewide demolition contractors. Someone from the town will need to organize the demolitions in groups. They want to do group demolitions.

Eben suggested creating a spreadsheet to track the status of buyout properties.

Tom said Johnson made a special request to recycle materials from the buyout properties. We may be able to contract with a nonprofit to take out salvageable materials so we put less material in the landfill. That still needs FEMA approval. Eben said it should be added to the list of old business.

12. Non-Union Cost of Living Allocation

Eben said we have been setting cost of living increases based on the previous year's November Consumer Price Index 12-month average. Based on that number, we budgeted for 3.5% cost of living increases for all non-union employees. The village voted to set an increase of 3.5% contingent on the town approving 3.5%. **Mike moved to accept the 2024 Consumer Price Index for the Northeast Region of 3.5% for salary increases effective January 1, 2026 for all non-union employees, Peter seconded and the motion was passed.**

13. Health Insurance Increases

Eben said historically the town and village have never selected a plan for employees. We have paid 90% of the cost of the Blue Cross Blue Shield Gold plan and employees can select the plan they want. The cost of that health plan is increasing by 5.272%

Mike said he feels we need to get away from Blue Cross Blue Shield and spend less taxpayer money. Eben said the question tonight is what we do starting January 1. Tom said one thing the town does that is somewhat unique and a gift to employees is that we set BCBS Gold as the standard and if an employee gets an MVP plan they may get money in their check for the difference in cost. He recommends moving to MVP as the standard. That would save the town about $8,500. He asked how many employees are on Blue Cross Blue Shield. Rosemary said one. Tom asked, everyone else is on MVP? Rosemary said yes. Tom said making that change would allow everyone to keep the same standard of care but employees would lose the cash difference. A fundamental question is whether the board views this benefit as health insurance only or as a cash value that is part of employees' income. If it is the latter, he thinks every employee should get the same amount, whether they are on a family plan or a single plan. If we are just taking care of employees and their families by providing health insurance, then he feels there should be no cash benefit.

Lydia Putvain said the village trustees have agreed to 90% of BCBS Gold for next year. She asked if Tom is talking about 100% or 90% of MVP. Tom said he would recommend the same 90%.

Mike said he believes everyone should be on MVP. We should offer only that.

Eben asked how much we spend on health insurance total. Tom said the projected amount with increases for this year is $189,590.52. For office employees, the total is $79,622. The library amount is $17,437.

Eben said he feels it is late to change from what we budgeted for. He would like VLCT to start a captive insurance plan.

Tom said he thinks the board needs to consider what the purpose of offering benefits to employees is. Retention? Trying to get better employees? Cash value? Answering that question will help guide the board. Paul said if our answer is cash value, then there may be some single employees we end up giving $30K to because they are not taking family plan insurance. That is a real cost. Rosemary said currently only one person is on a family plan. Mike asked if the town pays out the full cash value if someone doesn't take the health insurance. Rosemary and Eben explained that we pay 50% of what we would pay for a single plan (90% of the BCBS Gold cost.)

Eben said he views health insurance as a benefit. If an employee gets a more expensive plan than BCBS Gold, they pay the difference.

Paul asked why we are paying 90% of the more expensive plan rather than 90% of the less expensive plan. Rosemary said when this first started, the two plans were very close in price.

Paul said if we switched to paying for the MVP plan we would save a little under $9K a year. Eben said that is a third of a penny on the tax rate. Rosemary said if we change to paying 90% of the MVP plan, employees will get less in their paychecks.

Adrienne said as a taxpayer she wants town employees to have the best benefits we can provide. She doesn't care if that increases her taxes. Tom asked if she is saying BCBS is a better insurance company than MVP, or does she want to give employees more money? Adrienne said she wants them to get more money. Tom said a single person doesn't have the opportunity to get as much as someone who is married and can take their spouse's insurance and get a buyout. Paul asked, currently we offer the benefit that if someone goes on their spouse's insurance they get 50% of the health insurance cost? Eben said yes, 50% of the 90% we pay. If you got a divorce or your spouse passed away, you would then lose that.

Lydia said as a taxpayer, ratepayer and employee she would rather that the board leave the benefits as they are and talk to employees about what they want for the future. It is stressful to have the board make decisions every year that could affect employees' insurance and pay.

Peter said he thinks we should leave things as they are for now and then after the first of year work with the trustees and the employees to figure out what we want to do in the future and not wait until next November. Mike agreed. Eben said the two union contracts are a complication.

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Peter moved to continue the town health insurance benefit structure as is, with an employer contribution of 90% of the Blue Cross Blue Shield Gold plan, Mike seconded and the motion was passed.

Eben said the village trustees approved employee holiday party expense of $400 for their share. Eben said that is within the amount that can be approved without board authorization. Tom said he already told employees they can have $400 from the town as well.

14. First Draft of the Budget

Tom said last year we budgeted $180K from cash on hand to reduce taxes. We have a longstanding process that probably needs to come to an end. We should move to using an audited surplus amount rather than an anticipated surplus. But if we do that, it will leave one year without any surplus to reduce taxes. This might be the year to do that, because we have a large amount of cash on hand, more than what we thought. There was discussion about the fact that the cash on hand figure includes delinquent taxes that have not yet been collected.

Tom said there are some issues with the Holcomb House that the Historical Society would like the selectboard to decide on. They would like to insulate one wall at an estimated cost of $5K, replace the roof for an estimated $20K and repair floor upstairs for an estimated $10K. Does the board want to budget for any of that work? After some discussion, the board agreed to pay $15K for repairs out of the current year's budget and to budget $20K for roof replacement in FY27, with the money to come from the buildings and grounds reserve. Eben said he reserves the right to change his mind about this after the board has seen the full budget. The board instructed the Historical Society to get quotes for the work.

Tom said Isabelle Sullivan wants to take a 3-day training for $400. Will the board allow recreation to go over a 2.8% increase so she can take the training? The board agreed to that.

Tom suggested increasing the contribution to the highway capital equipment fund beyond what we have already budgeted if we have extra money. Eben suggested changing the annual contribution from $7K to $10K in the spreadsheet formula. Tom said that keeps it from going negative in 15 years, which it otherwise would.

Tom said Jason has one paving project priced out. Does the board want him to price out another project for after July 1? That is a question to think about.

The board agreed to have a special meeting on November 20 to work on the budget and to review resumes and decide which town administrator candidates to interview.

15. Lowe Lecture Hall

Peter asked where we are with asbestos and lead inspections and the structural assessment at the Lowe Lecture Hall. The board agreed that Peter should contact people about having that work done. It was also agreed that Peter should contact the town's lawyer about starting whatever work is needed for the acquisition.

16. Executive Session – Legal Matters

Paul moved to find that premature general public knowledge regarding the town's legal matters would clearly place the town at a substantial disadvantage play by disclosing strategy and to enter into executive session to discuss town legal matters under the provisions of 1 V.S.A. § 313(a)(1)(A), with only the selectboard and Tom invited to remain,

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Mike seconded and the motion was passed at 9:13. The board came out of executive session at 9:25.

17. ***Executive Session – Employment Evaluation***
Adrienne moved to enter executive session for employee evaluation under the provisions of 1 V.S.A. § 313(a)(3), Mike seconded and the motion was passed at 9:25. The board came out of executive session at 10:23.

18. ***Adjourn***
The meeting was adjourned at 10:23.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths

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