

JOHNSON SELECTBOARD MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
MONDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2025

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

Others: Rosemary Audibert, Carl Rogers (remote), Karen Sentoff, Kathy Black, Joe Salerno, Jan Gearhart, Ellis O'Hear, Eric Nuse, Kim Dunkley, Doug Molde, Howard Romero, Brian Raulinaitis, Carrie Johnson, Morna Flaum, Diana Osborn, Margo Warden (remote), JJ (remote), Dave Meyer (remote), Gary Circosta (remote)

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*

No changes to the agenda were needed.

3. *Public Comment and Public Announcements*

No members of the public wished to comment.

4. *Selectboard Updates and/or Concerns*

Adrienne noted that the Holiday Jubilee is happening this Saturday.

5. *Consent Agenda*

The consent agenda consisted of the minutes of October 29, November 3, November 12, November 14, November 17, November 20 and November 24 and acceptance of the resignation of Peggy Williams from the Rail Trail Committee. It was agreed to remove the minutes of November 24 from the consent agenda because they had been posted to the website but not emailed to the board. **Paul moved to approve the consent agenda as adjusted, Peter seconded and the motion was passed with Mike abstaining as he was not present for one of the meetings.**

6. *Road Foreman Report and Any Action Items*

Eben said the road crew has been plowing. Jason mentioned to him that he feels we will need to increase the amount budgeted for sand by quite a bit. Jason also said the crew may be able to work on Scribner Bridge if time allows. Jason wanted the board to know that the crew may be tight on overtime by the end of winter. We had only 3 highway employees for a few weeks and that used up overtime.

7. *VHB Presentation of the Scoping Study for Connecting the Rail Trail to Downtown*

Karen Sentoff of VHB gave a presentation on the scoping study process and preferred alternatives. She said Evan Haugh and Joe Vanacore of VHB did the bulk of the work on the project. Carl Rogers and Doug Molde were involved, as was Tori Hellwig from the Lamoille County Planning Commission.

The process kicked off in January 2025. There was a local concerns meeting in May. VHB worked with the ideas that came up at that meeting and developed conceptual alternatives. In August 2025 they presented the alternatives to the community. Today they are hoping to move forward with an implementation plan and preferred alternative. The grant ends December 31 so they are hoping to finalize their report after this meeting.

The purpose of the project was to identify a preferred alternative for a multimodal connection between downtown and the rail trail. The Lamoille Valley Rail Trail does not connect to existing sidewalks. The existing route along Railroad Street lacks consistent facilities and wayfinding and does not serve users like snowmobilers or skiers, falling short of its potential. At the first public meeting, people encourage prioritizing quality of the trail experience over a direct or easy route. They wanted unique features and local context.

Karen showed the different alternatives on an air photo. Alternative 1 is the minimum treatment on Railroad Street. Alternatives 2A and 2B are two different ideas for a shared use path along Railroad Street. Alternatives 3A and 3B each involve a bridge across the river other than the Railroad Street bridge. Alternative 1 includes a sidewalk rebuild, shared lane markings and gateway signage. Alternative 2A includes an 8-ft path from the front of the existing sidewalk back, with impacts to the right of way. There are some tree and slope impacts. 2B has an 8-ft shared use path that moves towards the roadway, narrowing the roadway for vehicular traffic. 3A includes a bridge to Wescom Road, connecting town resources. 3B would potentially connect via some of the buyout parcels closer to downtown than the bridge in 3A.

At the second public meeting where alternatives were presented, there were a couple of main themes. One was that Railroad Street is the intuitive and most direct connection. There was support for a Railroad Street route. There was also support for improving the gateway treatment, so access to the route is more intuitive. VHB heard that there is not an appetite for a shared use path. People want to retain on-road biking with sharrows and signage. There is currently an acceptable sidewalk condition but it is pretty narrow. Widening it to 6 ft. should be considered. They also heard support for a bridge to Wescom Road. That was preferred rather than a bridge using the FEMA buyout parcels. There are no road impacts. The other bridge option would need easements. The bridge would connect to the skate park, the community garden and the mobile home park. After that meeting, VHB decided to refine and advance alternatives 1 and 3A.

The preferred alternative takes a phased approach. Phase 1 focuses energy on enhancing the gateway at the southern end of Railroad Street. Phase 2 enhances the rest of Railroad Street. Phase 3 would be constructing a Wescom Road trail bridge. The Railroad Street phases would be short-term and medium-term projects. Putting in a bridge connection where the town owns land is a long-term initiative that could integrate with a future Route 15 connection identified by the ongoing Route 15 bicycle and pedestrian scoping project.

Phase 1 would involve the segment of Railroad Street south of the bridge, between the trail and the bridge. It would include defining driveways and carrying a sidewalk connection through the defined driveways and creating a shared experience along the roadway with signage and shared lane markings. It would also address some of the challenges along the rest of the Railroad Street corridor, such as lifting the storm inlet pipes to reduce the hazard for bikes.

Phase 2 would focus on the northern section of Railroad Street. It could include replacing the sidewalk with a 6 ft. wide sidewalk and re-establishing the curb line that has disappeared, making a tight street with a defined edge. It would also involve implementing some of the stormwater planning that has been done. There are likely some opportunities for grant funding for that. It would include milling and overlaying the roadway and putting in shared road markings and signage.

Phase 3 involves a bridge connection between Old Mill Park and Wescom Road. Opportunities for a loop or further spur may come as part of the Route 15 bicycle and pedestrian scoping study.

Karen showed a table of local and regional considerations, transportation considerations and resource impacts for the no build option and phases 1, 2, and 3. She said VHB is asking the selectboard to endorse the preferred alternative and implementation plan.

Paul said if he understands correctly, VHB is talking about expanding the sidewalk one foot towards the road. Is there an established bike lane on the road? Karen said with the width of the roadway and the posted speed they were thinking it would be a shared space, not a striped lane. Paul asked, why not try to have an extra foot used for a bike lane in the road rather than for sidewalk? Karen said taking the space from the roadway narrows the street. The constraining feeling helps to convey to drivers that this is a narrow road and they should go slowly. Paul asked, in your experience a painted bike lane doesn't do the same thing? Karen said 4 feet or preferably 5 feet are needed for a bike lane. It would be possible to have a bike lane on just one side of the road and have a very narrow vehicular lane. It would be tricky to have bike lanes on both sides of the road in the amount of space there is.

Mike said Railroad Street is tight enough as is without taking another foot off. Eben said it may slow traffic down. Mike said yes, in a perfect world.

Karen said VHB's scope is pretty much wrapped up. The next step would be for the community to find funding for design and construction of the first phase.

Jan Gearhart asked how high the curb would be. Karen said it is typical for it to be about 6 inches. Jan said she would be worried about the danger of bikes falling off or running into that curb.

Ellis O'Hear said the snowmobile club used to have a suspension bridge over the river but it was taken out by a flood. He has previously researched the cost of putting in another bridge. People have also looked at making the Railroad Street bridge wider. There is a possible issue with the sidewalk. The water mains are on the same side of the road as the sidewalk. That could be problematic. He likes the ideas that were presented.

Adrienne said she is in favor of the preferred alternative with a bike lane. She would love to see some way to pave the bike lane differently. She has driven on roads with lanes in colored textured asphalt, which provides more of a visual cue to drivers. Maybe there could be short markers sticking up. Was VHB able to look at that at all? Karen said that relates to Paul's question. With the width of the road, it is challenging to establish painted bike lanes that have a 5-ft dedicated width. This would be a great opportunity for advisory lanes marked with a dashed line, but that was an experimental treatment that has gone out of practice. The idea is to try to make it a slow and shared street so bikes mix with vehicles. It is a pretty low volume street so there would not be many vehicles in conflict. Adrienne asked if she is saying we would not have a bike lane, just bring the curb out and put painted bike symbols to say that bikes could drive on the street with cars. Karen said yes. Adrienne said she wants a bike lane.

Peter said he has heard that a lot of people have the idea that narrowing the road slows traffic. He assumes there has been research about the impact of road narrowing. Karen said there is safety data from research that indicates that as you narrow the street there are fewer crashes.

Peter asked if a traffic study was done on Railroad Street. Karen said she believes the annual average daily traffic count is about 1,082 vehicles. She believes that data is in the report.

Eric Nuse said sometimes when trucks come along, the road seems tight now with its current width. But VHB has said there would not be a high curb on the side by the Gihon, so trucks would be able to pull over onto the grassy section. That would somewhat mitigate the narrowing.

Adrienne asked if there is concern about the Wescom Road bridge putting bikers so far from the village center. Karen said it was recognized that that is not the most direct connection to downtown, but that connection creates an opportunity for a recreational spur. People can go to the skate park and other resources on the other side of the river and it would connect a neighborhood that is now pretty isolated from downtown. People in that neighborhood don't currently have a safe way to get downtown. In the interim, before there is a better connection for those people, they could be connected to downtown via Railroad Street.

Kim Dunkley asked who is responsible for the stormwater grates on the road. Eben said the town does not own the sidewalks or the stormwater, sewer or water infrastructure. The infrastructure is aging and is built on clay. We have talked about the village and town both applying for a Class 2 paving grant so the town could rebuild the road and the village could rebuild its infrastructure. We should keep that in mind. He can't say whether the village would say yes or no to widening the sidewalk by a foot.

Kim asked if any specific grants have been pinpointed for different items. Karen said because Railroad Street is very high priority in terms of stormwater infrastructure for the community and for the opportunity to enhance the connection for bicyclists and pedestrians, she thinks the stormwater component of the Transportation Alternatives Program, which caps at \$750,000, could be a good avenue for that. The Transportation Alternatives Program has grants that are focused on alternative transportation and also grants that are focused on stormwater and environmental improvements. This project could be a good fit for the stormwater grant or for a pedestrian improvement grant.

Kim said the most hazardous thing for biking on Railroad Street is the grates. Karen said that is why VHB included inlet height adjustment and some spot pavement improvements in the phase 1 cost estimate.

Paul said the costs were pretty much the same between the two different bridge alternatives. Is that because for Alternative 3A, which has a much longer run along Route 15, only the section to the bridge was included? Karen said in the report, some improvements to Route 15 are included in the cost estimate and scope for alternatives 3A and 3B, but in the implementation plan, phase 3 only contemplates the connection between Old Mill Park and Wescom Road and not the improvements for a loop on Route 15.

Paul said he is having a hard time with narrowing Railroad Street without defining a bike lane. Karen had said the option for an advisory lane has gone away. Is that because of VTrans? Karen said it was allowed in the previous VTrans manual but it has been taken away in the latest standards, which engineers have to use to draw up plans. They are not allowed to use advisory lanes anymore. We could contemplate a striped bike lane in one direction, but then we would end up with even narrower vehicular lanes. We could be narrowing the road by 4 feet rather than 1 foot

Diana Osborn asked if we could have signage inviting bicyclists to dismount and walk on the sidewalk. We don't want e-bikes or snowmobiles on the sidewalk, but maybe we could let people know that a family with kids or a skateboarder could use the sidewalk. Kim said parents with little kids do use the sidewalk. Diana said especially if the sidewalk is going to be wider, it seems like that could be a shared zone for slower uses.

Doug Molde said he is not sure about the village's participation in this. The goal was to roll this out as quickly as possible because people are establishing patterns of usage on the rail trail. Railroad Street is probably the best alternative. He looked at the report and he likes all of it except the preferred future alternative. He thinks that is contrary to the goal of bringing people into the village. He doesn't think the purpose of this study was to bring people out to other attractions. He suggests moving ahead with the Railroad Street alternative and waiting to see if there are options in the future with the buyout properties or if a sidewalk is extended to Wescom Road.

Eben said the board is being asked to approve the scoping study, not apply for a grant. Karen said that is correct. She is asking the board to endorse the preferred alternative, which calls for working on the Railroad Street rail trail connection in the short term, working on Railroad Street north of the bridge in the medium term and working on a Wescom Road trail bridge in the long term.

Paul moved to accept the VHB report on the scoping study for connecting the rail trail to downtown as presented and to endorse the short-term goal of enhancing the connection between the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail and Railroad Street, Mike seconded and the motion was passed.

8. *Review Final Staffing Study Report Provided by Maple Hollow Consulting*

Carrie Johnson had sent out a final report to the board. Board members discussed it and suggested some wording changes for clarity and accuracy.

Mike said when he looks at Appendix G, showing number of employees and number of miles of highway in other municipalities, he does not see a justification for hiring a fifth public works employee. Carrie said she knows Hyde Park is seriously considering hiring a sixth person. Paul brought up a sentence in the comparative analysis section that he feels does not really support adding a fifth employee. Carrie said the recommendation to hire a fifth employee is based less on miles of road and more on continuity of services if one employee is sick or injured. Paul suggested that the current wording is not accurate. Adrienne asked if it is fair to say that our vulnerability in the case of an employee being out is the same as the other towns on the chart. Carrie said yes. She said Johnson is roughly in the middle. She thinks we have a case for hiring

a fifth person soon given the requirements that towns now have to operate under. She asked employees if they are able to take vacations when they choose to. That is something every public works department struggles with. Employees need some work-life balance so they don't look for jobs elsewhere. Mike said it would have been nice to see Morrisville included in the Appendix G comparison. He thinks that would support his position that we do not need five employees. Carrie pointed out that Morrisville has more employees and a lot of miles of road. Eben said they also maintain sidewalks.

Paul asked about the recommendation to consider a part-time HR/administrative assistant to support personnel records and compliance. Is Carrie envisioning that that person would support the town administrator? Existing office staff? Carrie said a little of both. The person could be a part-time consultant who could provide support with onboarding, separation, benefits, etc. The person would support the town administrator but also anyone who has been hired and is coming on board. When she analyzed the overall structure she got concerned about who would pick up the slack if the town administrator was on vacation. Also, not everyone is an expert on personnel. It can intermittently take a decent amount of time when the town administrator has other things to do.

Eben brought up the chart that inaccurately shows the current town organizational structure. Carrie agreed to change it. Paul clarified that currently the only direct report to the town administrator is the rec coordinator.

Adrienne asked, Carrie thinks the assistant town clerk should report to the town administrator? Or should the assistant clerk report to the town clerk? Carrie said with restructuring there is a question as to whether the assistant clerk will also be an assistant to other people. Rosemary said the town clerk/treasurer is just a regular employee now. She thinks the town clerk/treasurer should be under the town administrator.

Carrie said she will make the edits that were discussed. Eben said he thinks she can just send them to the board but does not need to come back to a meeting.

Eben said he wants to point out that our tax rate is so high compared to other towns because we have a low grand list.

Eben noted that on page 9, he thinks the recreation programming and salary budgets are reversed, at least for Johnson.

The board agreed that they will approve the report when they get the final version with the amendments discussed tonight.

9. *Legion Field Grading for Ice Rink*

Howard said he is having a hard time finding someone to level Legion Field. He found someone who could do it for \$500. The next lowest price he got was \$2,500. But we waited too long. People he spoke to all had their machines put away for the winter. He contacted Greg Tatro to see if he would help us out and he plans to talk to him tomorrow. He doesn't have an answer tonight. He is hearing from people who have graders that with the snow and the thawing ground underneath, getting the field level might make a real mess. He doesn't see why, but he is not experienced with that equipment. And he is not too concerned because we are we doing a lot of

work on Legion Field next year anyway. He would like to be authorized to spend up to a certain amount of money for field leveling in case he is able to find someone who can do it now.

Paul said we have had an uneven field in the past. Can we live through another winter with it like that? Brian Raulinaitis said with the field the way it is now, maintaining the ice rink is too much work and it would not be feasible for him to do it. The village doesn't like him using their hydrant and it is too much work with a small hose. It would not take as much water if the field were closer to level.

Eben asked if Howard is proposing taking money out of the Legion Field grant. Howard said yes. He suggested \$1,000.

Mike moved to approve spending up to \$1,000 for leveling Legion Field, Paul seconded and the motion was passed.

10. TSSA Ordinance and Map Revision Adoption

Mike moved to approve the Town Sewer Service Area ordinance and map as presented on December 1, 2025, Peter seconded and the motion was passed.

11. Discussion of the Prindle Lot Conservation Easement Process

Eben said the town's attorney advised that for placing a conservation easement on the Prindle lot to offset the loss of deer wintering area for the industrial park, we should go through the same process as if we were selling the property. Board members agreed to proceed with that process.

12. RERC Steering Committee Appointments

Carl said he had included Diana Osborn on the list of people who want to be on the RERC steering committee, but she does not wish to be a steering committee member, though she will participate as a member of the public when public forums are held. No one else has come forward from the public, but it has been suggested that Isabelle Sullivan would be a good asset on the steering committee and she is interested. Does the board want Carl to advertise to seek more letters of interest from residents, business owners/managers or even non-residents? Does the board want him to contact the Green Mountain Club, the state rail trail office, VAST, the Vermont Mountain Bike Association and Disc Golf Vermont to see what their interest would be in participating? Does the board know of other groups that should be contacted?

Adrienne asked how many more people we need on the steering committee. Carl said there is no minimum or maximum. Paul said he would be interested in seeing if the groups Carl suggested have ideas. Eben asked when the group needs to be appointed by. Carl said he has not heard from the EPA office except for an email saying they are back to work. He is guessing that at the earliest we might need the group by the end of January. Adrienne asked if we can approve some steering committee members now and approve others later. Carl said he believes so.

Adrienne moved to appoint the following people to the Johnson Recreation Economy for Rural Communities task force: Kathy Black, Charles Flaum, Morna Flaum, Doug Molde, Kate Harney, Isabelle Sullivan, Yva Rose, and Eric Nuse. Paul seconded and the motion was passed.

Carl will contact the groups he named to see if there is any interest in having someone from those groups on the steering committee.

13. Town Administrator Transition Planning

The board reviewed the projects that are in process. Paul said the only one that will really need attention between now and the end of the year is the library.

Peter asked who will coordinate taking dirt from Holmes Meadow and putting it on School Street. Eben said he is not sure. He will talk to Seth Jensen of LCPC about it. Diana Osborn asked if that is the dirt that will be used to level the field for the ice rink. Peter said no. This will be to level the spot for the library. Diana asked if it could be used for the ice rink. Mike said he thinks the only dirt needed for that leveling is what is already there. Paul said an issue is that we don't want to add dirt in the flood plain. Diana said Isabelle Sullivan commented recently that the dirt on the baseball diamond is too thin even to sink a plate into. If there is extra dirt from Holmes Meadow, perhaps it could be used there.

14. Budget Update

It was agreed to schedule a budget meeting on December 10 at 6:30.

15. Review and Award General Contractor for the Library Bids

Adrienne left the room for this discussion. Peter said the grant the library received was \$1.5 million. We have \$166,997 in insurance money. So far we have spent \$805,547. Rosemary said that does not include payment to Dale Tatro, which is \$184K. Eben said if we include the utility work by Tatro we have a balance of \$677,450.

Peter said when the library committee met yesterday, they discussed that there is a gap between the money they have available and the estimated cost of the project. They are committed to raising the difference without coming to the town through a combination of a capital campaign and some grants they want to apply for. Hopefully volunteers can be used to do some of the work to trim costs. His feeling is that we have to go on faith that we can close the gap, because if we slow the project down and do not finish it by December 31, 2026, we will need to return the \$805K we have spent.

Eben asked what needs to be completed in order for the project to be considered finished. Peter said his understanding is that to meet the grant requirements we need to put in space for telehealth, a computer room and 24-hour Wi-Fi. Eben said he doesn't want to count on the library raising more than \$50,000 a month, which is what would be needed, and the town needing to pay if they are not able to raise the money. Is this the time to say "no addition" or make some changes? He doesn't know if he has ever seen a library fundraising campaign raise more than \$50,000 a month.

Peter said on top of other plans the library can include a mortgage if necessary. Eben asked how they would take out a mortgage on property the town owns. Rosemary said it would have to be through the town. Eben said we would hold the liability.

Mike said the 3 bids would result in funding gaps of \$670,750; \$802,550 or \$1,589,550. Is the library going to raise that kind of money in a year? Peter said the alternative is to abandon the project and return \$800K.

Eben asked about the possibility of trimming back excess work instead. Peter said we can trim back the work. He talked with the architect yesterday and he said he would re-price the windows. Paul asked about cost saving measures being considered that would help close the

gap. Peter said less expensive options can be considered for things like windows and flooring. Mike said those things are a drop in the bucket.

Mike said we don't have the money. We are going on faith that we will get it and if we do not we will have to give back what we have spent. Peter said given that, he would rather gamble on the library making it work.

Eben said if the library got \$100K in grants and raised \$20K a month, we would still not have all the money we needed. If the building is not completed, is our only alternative then to send \$1.5 million back? Running on faith could cost the taxpayers a lot more money. He is asking if the building can be completed.

Peter said he is in favor of finishing a building that meets the three grant criteria, whatever it looks like. If the floor needs to be plywood, we live with that. Eben said our insurance company won't allow certain things in a commercial building accessible to the public.

Brian Raulinaitis said he and Dale Tatro both feel there is a lot in their bids that can be trimmed. There is a lot of fat that can be trimmed in the mechanical, electrical and plumbing areas. He and Dale are both willing to provide cheaper options. They gave prices for what the library wanted. Dale said the cupola in the design is very expensive and makes no sense for the town. Brian said some trim details could be dialed back. Dale said vinyl siding could be used rather than spruce. Brian said there is room to lower the cost – not by enough to erase the funding gap, but the library board is passionate about libraries and good about writing and finding grants. He thinks the selectboard should give them a shot.

Dale said he thinks if the town is lucky \$100,000 could be cut from his price. Brian said he thinks he padded his bid a little more than that. For instance, he included an alarm system. Dale suggested letting the architect know that the town wants to save money. Brian said he thinks he could organize some volunteers to help, leading to some savings. He would be doing that as a community member, not as a business owner.

Paul asked how it would work if we awarded the contract to one of the bidders and then wanted to make changes. Dale said then items would be deducted from the contract. Brian said he thinks the board should pick a contractor and work with the contractor and trust them. He doesn't think there is time to go back and forth. There should have been a general contractor 12 months ago. Paul asked if it is possible to build the building but not finish the entire inside. Brian said he thinks not with the grant requirements.

Paul moved to award the contract to Back Forty Builders for the amount of \$1,480,000, based on the email from the library trustee chair, with the understanding that the project will be value engineered for cost savings. Eben asked, he is not going with the low bid? Paul said he is going with the library chair's recommendation. **Peter seconded.** Eben said the only way he will vote yes is if the motion is amended to say that the town is not going to be on the hook for any overages. Peter said that was our agreement with the library. **Paul and Peter agreed to a friendly amendment stating that the town will not be responsible for any overages. The motion was passed with Adrienne abstaining as she is an employee of Brian**

Raulinaitis. Mike said he is voting in the affirmative under protest. He does not like to go into something when he does not know what the outcome will be. Eben said he echoes that.

16. Executive Session

Adrienne moved to go into executive session under 1 V.S.A. § 313a(3) for interview evaluation, Paul seconded and the motion was passed at 8:53.

The board consented out of executive session at 9:23.

Paul moved to offer an applicant the town administrator position contingent upon background and reference checks and successful salary negotiations, Mike seconded and the motion was passed with Adrienne opposed.

17. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 9:26.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths