Approved January 22, 2026

JOHNSON SELECTBOARD MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
FRIDAY, JANUARY 5, 2026

Present: Selectboard members: Mike Dunham, Peter Hammond, Eben Patch, Paul Warden
Others: John Sutherland, Rosemary Audibert, Lois Frey, Linda Benezra, Doug Molde, Beth Foy, Daryl West, Diana Osborn, Casey Romero, Jason Whitehill, Jasmine Yuris, Kelly Vandorn, Aurora River, one other person
Absent: Adrienne Parker

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. ***Call Meeting to Order***
   Eben called the meeting to order at 6:30.
2. ***Introduction for New TA***
   The new town administrator, John Sutherland, introduced himself. He is the former town manager for Eagle Lake, Maine. Eben introduced the members of the public present to John.
3. ***Consider Additions or Adjustments to the Agenda***
   Eben added ratification of the Class IV road policy and an update on tree clearing at the industrial park. Peter added an update on the old town hall.
4. ***Public Comment***
   Doug Molde said the Lamoille River Paddlers Trail committee and the town Rail Trail Committee will be interested in what is done with the FEMA buyout properties and may have suggestions. He imagines the Recreation Economy Task Force will be interested as well.

   Diana Osborn asked how the Legion Field information session overlaps with the visioning project and whether the visioning project meeting has been rescheduled yet. Paul said Legion Field will be one aspect of visioning but the two efforts are not really related.

   Beth Foy said she was surprised to see the notice of the Legion Field meeting today. In the future she thinks public notice for important meetings like this should go out more than 2 days ahead of time. She can’t change her schedule on such short notice.

   Lois Frey said she misses receiving the packets of information the selectboard used to send out prior to meetings. She recommends that the board reconsider sending out the packets.

   Adrienne asked how other board members feel about making agenda packets public before meetings. Eben said he wants them to be public. Adrienne said she does also. Paul said he thinks all selectboard members do. But do we need two packets, one for the public and one for the selectboard? Or can any information that is only for the selectboard be in a separate email? Mike said having two different packets is more burden on the town administrator. Peter said he appreciates reading the town administrator comments in the packet in advance of the meeting. He would not want them to be impacted by the fact that they are public.

   Eben asked for John’s thoughts. John asked what is being put on the website now. In Eagle Lake, copies of the agenda were posted online and people could call him for information on agenda items. Eben said right now agendas are posted. The request from the public is to post the full meeting packet.

Adrienne said the ideal schedule would be for the agenda to come out on Wednesday and the full packet to come out maybe Friday, or earlier if possible. The packet is helpful to give context on agenda topics.

Eben said if the board agrees, he can work with John after the meeting on how making the packet public would look.

Beth said there is a difference between fact and opinion. The packet used to contain lot of fact. A separate email to the board can contain opinions. She thinks the information in the packet is important for an informed community. If there are opinions that need to be stated, she feels they should be stated in conversation, not in a one-way dialog. She thinks it is easier for selectboard members if the packet is public so they are not questioned about what the agenda items are.

Peter asked, when Brian Story was here, was there commentary in the packet? Beth said he mostly stated facts, not recommendations.

Beth said anyone can request a copy of the packet anyway as it is public record. Providing it to those who request it is more of a burden than just making it public.

Doug Molde said he misses seeing the information in the packet.

Diana said the conflict seemed to arise from the town administrator report included in the packet, which had comments and opinions. One possibility is having that sent privately to the board rather than it being included in the packet.

Donna Griffiths said the town administrator report is often helpful to her in preparing the minutes because it includes context that may not be stated clearly during the meeting, as it is assumed that selectboard members have already read it. She would be disappointed if the town administrator report were available only to selectboard members. She doesn't necessarily need to see it before the meeting, but it is easier for her if it is emailed to her automatically so she doesn't have to ask for it or make an effort to pick up a paper copy at the meeting.

Daryl West said he has concerns with our town spending. There is talk of a 6.5% to 10% tax rate increase for next year. We have a potential unknown with the library project on top of that and a lot of other projects in the works that could be expensive. He feels we may be starting to live beyond our means. He doesn't want to see Johnson get to the point where it is not an inviting place for people to move to because of our tax situation.

5. ***Selectboard Updates and/or Concerns***
   Selectboard members did not have any updates or concerns.
6. ***Consent Agenda***
   The consent agenda consisted of the minutes of December 15. **<u>Mike moved to approve the consent agenda, Paul seconded and the motion was passed.</u>**
7. ***Clerk & Treasurer's Report: Warrants, Licenses, and any Action Items***
   Rosemary handed out the budget status report. She said the board needs to decide what to do with the opiate settlement money. We need to spend it soon, probably within the next quarter.

   <u>Mike moved and Peter seconded to divide the opiate settlement money the town has received between Healthy Lamoille Valley and Jenna's Promise.</u>

Paul said there had been a suggestion that we consider talking to the schools about using the money. One of our reasons for opting to take control of the money locally is to make sure it is spent on local residents. The schools serve only local residents and the other organizations do not. That seems like something worth considering.

Rosemary asked if he is thinking of the elementary school or the high school. Paul said both, but the elementary school serves Johnson residents.

Beth Foy said if the money is given to the other groups the town can ask that it be spent on Johnson residents. She recommends making that request.

Mike and Peter agreed to amend the motion to add that the recipients will be asked to use the money for Johnson residents if possible. The motion was passed with Adrienne and Paul opposed.

Rosemary asked if the revenue from cannabis licenses should be included in the same line as liquor license revenue or be in a separate line. Board members said it should be separate.

8. Highway Budget Review Questions

Peter said one question was when paving should happen. Jason said he would prefer to try to pave in June before this fiscal year ends. The board agreed to plan on paving in the current fiscal year.

Jason said the amount he recommends budgeting for winter sand is $80K, which is less than the $85K Eben had put in the budget.

Jason said he would like a winter maintenance policy the board is comfortable with. That would take the burden off him because he would follow the policy and any questions about it would come to the board. Eben asked if he has any recommendations. Jason said some people say we plow too much and some say it is not enough. He tries to follow the same standard every time. The part-time hours and the fifth employee have been taken away from the highway department and he just can’t keep up.

Eben asked if Jason still thinks we should pave the approach to the Railroad Street bridge next year. Jason said yes.

Eben said the current budget draft has 1020 hours of part time highway work with 4 full time employees. That could change. With no changes, the budget is a 6.87% increase.

Beth said she doesn’t understand having a conversation about a winter roads policy in the middle of winter. We need to keep our roads safe. Jason is the expert. We trust him to make calls about road maintenance. It doesn’t make sense to her to have a board that doesn’t understand roads create a policy.

Mike said many towns in Vermont have road policies that address things like how much snow needs to be on the road before the crew goes out. It does help the road crew. If the board develops a policy and has public discussion on it, the public has no gripe with the road foreman. People who have issues with it have to come to the selectboard.

Beth said she has often heard comments about how well our roads are maintained. She feels safer in Johnson than in some other towns. She prefers to feel safe while traveling on back roads. She thinks our road crew does a good job.

Peter said he would not presume to write a winter road policy without input from Jason. But he is interested in taking some heat off Jason.

John said if the public works director said he felt the roads were unsafe and the crew should go out, he would back him even if it did not match what the policy said. The policy would be guidance, not law.

Jason said the board is looking to save money. It is hard to do quality work with less than he has ever had before. He lost an employee that was doing a salt route. No one wanted to take it over, so now Jason does it. That means a lot of overtime. There will be more overtime than was budgeted for. The work takes longer with 4 people. He doesn't know how he will train a new part-time employee. There is not a lot of extra time for that. He worries that a part-timer might be rough on our equipment.

Doug Molde said it seems to him that the underlying issue is how the town's hiring is working out. He thinks the policy being discussed is a bad idea for the public.

Adrienne asked if Jason foresees any projects that need to be in the budget. Jason said no.

Adrienne asked, the Scribner Bridge work is not done yet, right? Eben said other work kept the crew from being able to do it before it snowed. Jason said the plan is still to take care of it.

Adrienne asked about summer projects. Jason said there will be some grant projects. We have approval for one and are still waiting for approval for another. The work includes ditching on Maple Hill and Clay Hill. Adrienne asked if Jason could send the board a schedule of when those and other projects will occur so we can warn the public about them. Jason agreed. Eben said it is helpful for the public to have information about ditching and roadside mowing.

Eben asked if we can try to get a Class II paving grant for paving on Wilson Road. Jason said that is the grant we are waiting to hear about.

9. Library Contract Budget Shortfall Discussion

Kelly Vandorn said the grant amount is $1.5 million. The grantor has set aside an additional $180K for us. The amount we have from insurance to repair the old part of the building is $166K. The library has $37K in their reserve fund and about $40K from donations and grants in their bank account. A donation was made specifically for furnishings for the new library that she didn't count in the total. She talked to the architect for the project today. He expressed his disappointment that his estimates for the addition were so far off from the bids that came in. He said he feels it is due to rising construction costs. The library trustees are in the process of applying for 3 grants. She has a meeting with the Department of Libraries set up for January 20. She will talk to them about the shortfall and find out what they recommend.

Eben said the shortfall doesn't look as big as he thought. It appears to be only $400K.

Kelly said she will get direction from the Department of Libraries on the best way to proceed and at their meeting later this month the library board will discuss fundraising. They plan to do the best they can to raise money to fill in the gap.

Eben asked if anyone has emailed the grant funder to say that we definitely need the extra funds they have available. Kelly said most Department of Libraries people were out of the office during the holidays.

Kelly said the library board has not looked too much yet at possible cuts for cost savings. They did not plan a complicated, plush project. It is pretty bare bones.

Kelly said the library doesn’t really have anyone looking at what they have spent and comparing it to the estimates and their budget. They can’t expect Rosemary to do that. She thought Tom was doing some of that, but he left. Eben suggested that she work with John to get a clearer picture.

Eben said he thinks we will be short on money needed for the project in March. The town has a grant match reserve fund. We have already allocated about $530K. Could we use the rest on this project? If we do short-term borrowing we will need to pay interest. If the funds can’t physically be raised, we will probably need a town meeting article for a bond vote.

Paul asked when the grants that are being applied for will be awarded. Kelly said she does not have that information in front of her. The Department of Libraries was months behind on awarding the grant they got. The $400K grant they are applying for now is also from the Department of Libraries. There could be a wait to find out if we get it. T-Mobile grants are awarded quarterly. She thinks they will be quicker to notify us. That is only $50K. There may be a grant from Community Bank. She thinks we will hear about that pretty soon. Rosemary asked if there is anything available from the Community Foundation. Kelly and Jasmine Yuris said yes.

Eben said he thinks getting on top of this will be a priority for the town administrator.

Eben asked what the fundraising plan is. Kelly said the library board only found out about the shortfall the first week in December. They haven’t had a board meeting since then. She talked to Jeanne Engel yesterday. Jeanne she said she would be happy to be on the fundraising committee. The library board will discuss fundraising at their meeting later this month. They have talked about a sidewalk with bricks with people’s names on them. People would have to donate a certain amount to get a name on a brick.

Jasmine said a 7-minute documentary about the library move was made. It has already won an award. The library board plans on using that as part of a capital campaign. Hardwick just had a similar situation where they were running a capital campaign for their library. Someone from Iowa reached out to her today – a writer who wants to write a children’s book about the library move. They are sending t-shirts all across the country to people who have seen the video clip. She feels we should continue with a very positive narrative. The story is already snowballing. We can’t let it dismantle. We all need to be on board with this. We need to be reminded how cool this is. If a bond vote does need to happen, could the library’s capital campaign be to pay the town back for the bond? Rosemary said yes. Jasmine said the grants could be used retroactively. It sounds like in the interest of time a bond vote is the way to go, with an explanation to voters that there is ample opportunity to get the money back.

Eben said if there is a town meeting article for a bond vote, he would welcome the library presenting it. We are losing 18 taxpaying properties soon. We may also go out for a bond for the industrial park.

And we are looking at a 7% tax rate increase. As a taxpayer it is hard for him to ignore the timing and the cost.

Jasmine said the story is what will potentially bring us money.

Peter confirmed with Kelly that the meeting with the state Department of Libraries is January 20 and the library board meeting is January 21.

Peter said he learned recently that the Tatro contract included the hauling of fill to the site for the grading and that is all being taken care of by the contract for Holmes Meadow, under the grant for the Holmes Meadow project.

The library board will come to the first meeting in February. Eben suggested that they email out financial information ahead of the meeting.

Daryl West asked about the deadline for grant completion. Kelly said it is the end of December 2026. Daryl said projects often take longer than expected. What happens if we don't meet the deadline? Peter said he hopes that will be clarified with the state Department of Libraries. Kelly said she doesn't have that answer.

Daryl said he has concerns about all the different town projects and the loss of buildings on the tax rolls. Aurora River said she thinks we are all concerned. The library board is committed to seeing this through.

Eben asked Kelly to meet with John and Rosemary get financial information for the next meeting. He said he would gladly spend $5K for a fundraising expert who could come up with a plan to meet the shortfall.

Kelly invited John to be on the committee for the library project.

Jasmine encouraged the selectboard to trust the library board. Other projects going on in the town don't have an entire board outside of the selectboard working on them like the library project does.

10. General Budget Review

Eben said the current budget draft shows a 6.87% increase. If there were a bond vote for the library, that would be separate from the budget but would need to be incorporated when setting the tax rate.

This budget has a 20-hour per week highway employee instead of a fifth full-time position.

Eben asked Rosemary if she thinks we can increase revenue from interest. Rosemary suggested budgeting a slightly higher figure.

John said in Eagle Lake they put money in 30, 60 or 90 day CDs for higher interest rather than leaving it all in their operating account. The board agreed that John should work with Rosemary to look into that.

Adrienne asked why we collect taxes in 4 installments. Eben said he thinks that is easier for those with lower income. People complain less when payments are spread out. Lois Frey said people can choose to pay for the whole year all at once.

Mike asked if we have ever thought about waiving fees on delinquent taxes if they are paid in full. Eben said he thinks we should go to tax sale. Mike said an incentive to pay might be a good way to get money more quickly. Eben said if we do that people will stop paying their taxes on time and will just wait for this opportunity.

Daryl suggested there could be an incentive to pay taxes for the whole year at the first installment. Rosemary said some towns used to offer a discount for paying the whole amount at once. We would have to add the discount to the budget. Mike said he thinks if there were a decent discount a lot of people would pay up front. Eben said that is something for next year's board to consider. Rosemary said she thinks most towns have done away with that.

Eben suggested we could consider fewer installments.

Eben said he will propose some cuts to expenses at the next meeting. He asked if anyone has a projected percentage increase they want to go down to. Peter said he would like to be closer to the 3.1% Consumer Price Index.

Eben asked how much we will get next year for the payments to cover taxes on FEMA buyout properties. Rosemary said we will get payments for any buyout properties the town owns as of July 1. Eben said that could increase our revenue by $40-50K. Rosemary noted that only the municipal tax is covered, not the school tax.

Eben said he had added lines to the budget for expenses for the old town hall/Lowe Lecture Hall. It was discussed that the Lowe name was associated with a donor to the Vermont Studio Center so it may be more appropriate to refer to the building as the old town hall.

Adrienne said she would like the board to come up with ideas for ways to build revenue.

11. *Town Administrator Priorities*

Paul asked if John has had a chance to talk to Carl Rogers. Peter said yes. Paul asked if Carl and John have gone over the various projects and handed things off. Eben said he doesn't think the plan is for Carl to hand everything over. Carl picked up the Holmes Meadow project and that is currently moving. He will probably see it through. He is still doing a lot of work with the industrial park.

Eben said he would like some time dedicated to the library project and the FEMA buyout properties. Those are two things he sees as immediate priorities. John should review the priority list created for the previous town administrator and catch up on email. He should get in contact with Sarah Henshaw as part of working on FEMA buyouts. Adrienne said she will create a Google document with contact information. Eben asked Paul to introduce John to Tasha Wallis and Seth Jensen of the Lamoille County Planning Commission.

Casey Romero brought up the RFP that needs to go out for the FEMA-funded addition at the skatepark. Before Tom Galinat left, the skatepark committee urged him to get it out as soon as possible because there is a deadline. The committee anticipates that when bids come in there will be a gap between the funding amount and the cost because of the time lag between when estimates were developed and when we finally got approval. We have a June 30 deadline to complete construction.

Adrienne said she thinks the board should set clear expectations about when agendas and packets should go out and whether we want packets posted on the website.

Eben asked Rosemary how our cash flow is. Are we going to be short on cash? Rosemary said it will be tight. Taxes are starting to come in.

Diana Osborn said when the bond for the industrial park was approved, the old town hall and the library project were not on the table. What flexibility does the town have to ask whether the voters' priority is still the industrial park or if the library is now a bigger priority? If taxpayers are paying the bills, she feels they deserve an opportunity to weigh in on where things could be rearranged or cut. Maybe the board should encourage people to give input before town meeting.

Adrienne suggested maybe we could have a special budget meeting for people to give input and post the budget on the website for people to review beforehand.

Diana asked what flexibility the board has when people voted to approve a bond for the industrial park. Eben said we have multiple commitments for the industrial park. We have the Northern Border grant. We have talked about associated deed restrictions for other properties like the Prindle lot. That is the only project with a return on the investment. He feels cutting that would be selling his son short. His personal opinion is that we would be giving future citizens a worse tax rate for gain right now. Mike said it would be impossible to cancel the industrial park project. Diana said maybe the industrial park is not the best example but she thinks it would be helpful to know where there is flexibility and what we are committed to.

Eben said we currently have $179K in cash on hand that is not committed. He learned today that PILOT is dropping. He thinks we might want to think about using some of the cash on hand to reduce taxes next year.

12. ***Ratify Class IV Road Policy***

Eben said this policy was approved May 20, 2024 but we don't have a signed copy of it. **Peter moved to ratify the Class IV Road Policy as approved on May 20, 2024 with the current board members signing it. The motion was seconded and passed.**

13. ***Industrial Park Tree Clearing***

Eben said Carl Rogers is looking to have Mumley Engineering do a tree clearing layout for the industrial park so we can put out an RFP to have it logged. The state is doing a floodplain restoration project and would like the trees and stumps and is willing to pay the town for them. Are there any concerns with having Mumley do a layout for logging? The board agreed Carl can have them proceed with that.

14. ***Old Town Hall Update***

Peter said we will have a full environmental report later this week. The good news is that there is no asbestos. There is lead.

15. ***Adjourn***

The meeting was adjourned at 8:34.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths