

JOHNSON SELECTBOARD MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
FRIDAY, JANUARY 14, 2026

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

Others: John Sutherland, Rosemary Audibert, Lois Frey, Linda Benezra, Lydia Putvain, Sue Lovering

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. *Call Meeting to Order*

Eben called the meeting to order at 6:37.

2. *Consider Additions or Adjustments to the Agenda*

Eben added scheduling the next regular meeting and signature approval for a Holmes Meadow expense that was already approved.

3. *Public Comment*

No members of the public wished to comment.

4. *Selectboard Updates and/or Concerns*

Mike said the board authorized the Historical Society to spend \$5K to insulate a wall. One of the quotes received for the work was much less than expected. The electricians who did a job there recently said they didn't think the building had any insulation. Mike suggests using any of the \$5K that is not needed to insulate the one wall to add insulation to other walls.

Adrienne asked if insulating requires taking down the drywall. Mike said no; some clapboards are removed so cellulose can be blown in from outside. Adrienne said she is in favor of using the \$5K to insulate as much as we can, but maybe we should ask for a quote to insulate the whole building. Then if we decide we can't afford to insulate it all we can decide which walls would be most beneficial to insulate.

Eben suggested getting a contractor to provide a formal quote the board can approve. Mike suggested that the Historical Society should just have the contractor do the wall they initially planned to insulate and then see how much else they can do for the \$5K.

Mike said the water heater at the Holcomb House is not working. In the past, the Historical Society has located contractors and gotten bids for work at the Holcomb House. He believes they are the only town entity required to do that. He feels the selectboard ought to get the bids and make sure the work is done. He has already done legwork on the water heater. When he is no longer on the selectboard, he wouldn't mind being appointed by the board to be the Historical Society liaison and be the lead on anything that needs to be done on the Historical Society building. The board would go through him and he would work with the town administrator to get bids out.

Eben said he doesn't agree that the Historical Society is the only town group the selectboard asks to put out RFPs for their building. The library board has done it. The library is a town building. Mike said he thinks any town building should be taken care of by the selectboard. We should not ask any other town group to take care of a town building.

Paul said he agrees that the selectboard should be responsible for town buildings, but he doesn't know that we need to change our practice. If the library board does the legwork on a project, it will still

come to the selectboard for approval. Having Mike take care of getting bids for the Historical Society is great, but he doesn't think that means we need to appoint someone to do the same for the library.

Mike said the Historical Society only got one quote for insulation. Lois Frey said a second person has looked at the job and hopefully will send a bid soon for using a different kind of insulation.

5. Review Proposed Municipal Budget

Eben said the amount budgeted for interest and penalties on late taxes has been increased in the latest draft.

Peter asked about the line for revenue from law enforcement. Eben said his understanding is that we used to receive about 4 times more in revenue from tickets than what we get now. He argued last year that we should tell the Lamoille County Sheriff that we would like that to increase. Rosemary said we haven't gotten any ticket revenue from them for a long time. Our revenue is all from state police tickets. Eben said last year's board did not want to pressure the sheriff's department to write tickets. They were concerned that it could disadvantage people with lower socioeconomic status. Eben's argument was that it disadvantages people who break the law. Mike and Peter agreed that we should communicate to Roger Marcoux that we would like to see the sheriff's department writing more tickets. It was agreed to leave the amount budgeted the same and to communicate with the sheriff's department in the hope of increasing it for future years.

The board agreed to budget \$7,221 for payments from the state to cover taxes on the FEMA buyout properties we expect to own by April 1. That is 80% of the amount we would get if the state provided the full amount.

Eben said there is \$188K in the building reserve fund. We planned to spend \$20K of that for the Holcomb House roof. Mike said he thinks the Holcomb House roof can wait a year. It doesn't look that bad and it is not actually leaking. He thinks it is not a major concern.

Rosemary brought up the tower on the municipal building. Eben said that is in the village's court. We can bring in money from the building reserve fund for that even if it is not budgeted.

Eben suggested dropping the \$20K expense for the Holcomb House roof and reducing the amount brought in from the building reserve fund to \$10K, to be used for the old town hall.

Adrienne asked if there other reasons to replace the roof even if it is not leaking. Lois said Historic Preservation reviewed the building when the Historical Society bought it and a year or so ago they went over it again. Roof replacement was one of their number one recommendations. Historical Society members don't know a lot about roofs. There are new paints and things that can help with roofs. Maybe there is an alternative to replacement. It would be nice to have funds available if they come up with an alternative.

Mike said the leak was caused by the wall not being insulated. That led to heat building up on the roof and causing a leak. If the wall is insulated that won't be a problem. Paul asked if there is access to the attic. Would the Historical Society know if the roof is leaking? Lois said if they went into the attic they would know, but they don't go there regularly. Mike said with an old building like that, they would notice evidence of a leak on the ceiling.

Adrienne said she thinks we should leave the \$20K for roof replacement in the budget, since it was a recommendation. Eben said if the project didn't happen then the revenue for it wouldn't come into the budget. It won't affect taxes to take it out. Right now we are planning to spend \$10K on the old town hall and money isn't being brought in from the building reserve for that. Should we increase the amount we plan to bring in from the building reserve to \$30K? There is also work that could be done at the town garage. We are getting a MERP grant for some work and Jason thought while the contractors were there it would be a good idea to do some other work, such as replacing the boiler. It was agreed to increase the amount to be brought in from the building reserve fund to \$30K.

Paul noted that line 54 and line 341 represent revenue from the Historical Society and corresponding expense, but they are named two different things. It seems like it would be worth giving them matching names.

The board asked that the money in the paving reserve fund be put into a high interest account.

Eben suggested the board could talk to the library about adding donation revenue to the budget. Paul said it may be overly optimistic to expect them to get donations to help with operating expenses while they are doing a large project.

Peter asked if there can be a modest increase in recreation program fees. Eben said he has had an interest in that but he hasn't talked to the rec coordinator about it. Paul asked when fees were last increased. Rosemary said it has been at least 10 years. Peter suggested a 10% increase. Adrienne said she thinks we should invite Isabelle Sullivan to a meeting to talk about it. Eben said we have to have the budget approved by January 25. Adrienne suggested putting in an increased amount for now and talking to Isabelle later. She suggested that, for instance, a \$25 fee could be increased to \$35, which would be more than a 10% increase but does not seem excessive. Eben said we probably need to look at fees by activity. It was agreed that John will talk to Isabelle about fees and she can come to the next meeting if she wants.

Eben asked why Historical Society donations have dropped so much since 2024. Lois said they didn't have a big raffle this year. They have had bigger ones in previous years. Adrienne suggested increasing the amount of revenue expected to \$2K. Mike said he would leave it at \$1500 because they don't know if they will have something to raffle that will be a big draw. Eben said we should leave it at \$1500 but ask the Historical Society to try to increase it.

The board decided to decrease the amount budgeted for health officer salaries based on actuals.

Rosemary pointed out some revenue that was missing from the budget. Eben said for now he would plug it in under skatepark reserves but it will need to be moved.

Adrienne asked if we need to budget for the development review board if they have never spent anything. Eben said he will find out what that line was intended for.

It was agreed to increase the general insurance line to \$70K, as suggested by Rosemary.

Eben said he increased the amount budgeted for county tax to the number we got in the finalized county report.

Eben suggested reducing the line that funds the emergency reserve fund to \$8500, with the idea that future boards should get the contribution back to \$10K. He said there is about \$75K in the account now, to be used if we have an emergency that doesn't meet state or federal FEMA guidelines. The board agreed to reduce it to \$9K.

It was agreed to increase solid waste/landfill expense based on actuals.

We have been spending less than budgeted on professional development. It was agreed to decrease the budgeted amount to \$3K but to encourage staff to spend it.

There was discussion about whether the amount budgeted for heat could be decreased. Mike and Adrienne suggested reducing it from \$5K to \$4K.

Eben said Hyde Park previously recommended budgeting \$10K for kenneling service but now they are suggesting that we level fund or add 2% as a buffer if we want. The board agreed to budget \$5250.

Eben said the amount the sheriff's department proposed for patrol is a little less. Mike asked if we are ever going to cut back on public safety services a little to save money for the taxpayers. He suggested less patrolling. He asked, do people in town think we are getting value for the money? Adrienne said she doesn't think so. Eben said there is more violent crime than there used to be, so we may not see them patrolling as much. They may be working more on violent crimes. Mike said he thinks we need to ask Roger Marcoux about options.

Eben suggested the line for library building capital expense could be trimmed because it will be a new building under warranty so he doesn't think there should be capital expense. It was agreed not to budget for library capital expense and to reduce the amount budgeted for library maintenance and repairs to \$2500. Eben said someone needs to communicate with the library about what we did with those lines and see if they have a planned need.

Paul asked if we ever looked at the difference in cost between Blue Cross Blue Shield and MVP. Eben said he emailed information about it to the board. If we switched to paying 90% of MVP we would save \$27K. Paul said that is something we should be looking at for the future.

Lydia Putvain said moving to paying 90% of MVP would have a big financial impact on employees. For her, the increased cost would be over \$100 per week. Mike said we have to consider employees but also other people in town that don't have the kind of health insurance we offer. Lydia said the reduction in town contribution would be a hardship for her.

The board discussed the amount budgeted for uniforms. Mike said if we are going to have uniforms, they should be cotton. Polyester is a fire hazard. He suggested giving employees a uniform contribution and letting them buy their own. He thinks if we are going to give uniforms or a uniform allowance it should also be given to office employees.

Eben said he talked to Jason about reducing winter sand to \$75K.

In the section showing reservations included in FY24 cash on hand, Peter asked what the difference is between Conservation and Conservation Reserve Fund. Lois explained that the Conservation line is what is reserved in the Conservation Commission's regular budget. It is separate from the

conservation reserve fund. Peter asked, if the Conservation Commission underspends their budget, the money left at the end of the year goes into the Conservation line? Lois said yes. Eben said this is taxpayer money carried over without a motion of the selectboard. We don't automatically carry over unspent funds for all committees. It seems like the Conservation Commission may be getting an advantage other committees don't have. The library board asks the selectboard for unspent funds to be carried over; it doesn't happen automatically. Paul asked why the cash on hand at the end of the year doesn't go into the conservation reserve fund. Sue Lovering said because it might be earmarked for an ongoing project. Paul said with every other committee if they don't spend all their money by the end of the year it goes back to the town. But that is not the case with the Conservation Commission. Lois said that is right; their unspent money rolls over. Adrienne suggested perhaps that could be because of state statute that applies to a commission.

Eben asked what the board would like to do with the \$179K in cash on hand that is not being used to offset taxes. By statute, the tax anticipation reserve fund can be 10% of our overall budget. We could put \$40K into the tax anticipation reserve fund. Paul said the tax anticipation reserve currently has \$320K. Is that enough? Eben said first quarter payments are \$507K. We could increase the amount of cash on hand used to reduce taxes.

Eben said after we adjust the grand list, the tax rate increase based on this budget draft would be 3.913%. The tax rate would be 98.74 cents. Last year's tax increase was 4.11%.

Paul said he is in favor of putting the \$179K into reserve funds. Others agreed.

John passed out copies of a draft town meeting warning. It includes an article to make the town delinquent tax collector an appointed position. It has been an elected position and Rosemary has always run for it.

There was discussion about possibly stopping the practice of mailing town reports to everyone.

6. Signature Authorization for Holmes Meadow Expense

Eben said VLCT sent him an amended contract that adds \$50K to retain Weston & Sampson for Holmes Meadow testing. The board already approved the expense, which is grant eligible, and designated Eben as the signer for the contract. But he wants to make sure the board is okay with him signing the amended contract. Board members agreed he can sign it.

7. Scheduling Next Regular Board Meeting

Because next Monday is a town holiday, the board agreed to schedule its next meeting at 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, January 22 instead.

8. Other Business

John said he learned that one of the FEMA buyout buildings is a historic house that Julian Scott once lived in. He wasn't sure if the board was aware of the historical significance. Board members asked if John can look into what rules apply when a building is on the historic register. Rosemary said the closing for that house is supposed to be on January 29.

9. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 9:40.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths