

JOHNSON SELECTBOARD MEETING MINUTES
STEARNS PERFORMANCE SPACE, VTSU-JOHNSON
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2026

Present: Selectboard members: Peter Hammond, Adrienne Parker, Eben Patch, Paul Warden
Others: John Sutherland, Beth Mauch, Sherry Kollmann, Brady Rainville, Mike Palagonia, Sen. Rich Westman and about 45 faculty, staff, and community members
Absent: Mike Dunham

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Paul called the meeting to order at 6:07.

2. Presentation on VTSU-Johnson Developments and Plans for the Johnson Campus

Beth Mauch, chancellor of the Vermont State Colleges System, said they want to ensure that their college campuses remain places where people can come for education but also serve the needs of their communities. After the floods in 2023 and 2024 they had the opportunity to think about future needs and how the Johnson campus can help be a solution to some challenges.

They have been in conversations with the Johnson post office, which is in an area that flooded. The post office has accepted a lease for space on campus. They still need to go through the federal government appropriations process, but all indications are that as soon as they work through the details they will be in Martinetti Hall. The Johnson Health Center will also come onto the Johnson campus. They just signed a lease today. They will be in Senators, which will be renovated. The health center will provide opportunities for students to get health care and also clinical placements or potentially a job after graduation. The post office may offer internships or jobs for students.

Vermont State University president Sherry Kollmann said VTSU wants every campus to have a specific identity. They want to lean into an identity for the Johnson campus that can have community support and internal support. They want to make sure to create apprenticeship opportunities for students. One thing she has heard is that people really want to lean into healthcare. She thanked the leadership team, who had done a lot of work already before she started working here.

Brady Rainville, VTSU director of advising, reviewed the history of the Johnson campus. It was previously a teachers' college. It later expanded its scope. Johnson first unified with Lyndon and later they unified with Castleton and Vermont Technical College to form Vermont State University. This conversation can lay the foundation for the next 50 to 75 years of the campus and beyond.

Brady said there are 5 questions people are invited to answer, with a board for each question at the back of the room. Anyone who doesn't have the opportunity to speak tonight is encouraged to write down their thoughts on these questions and post them on the boards.

Mike Palagonia, director of public safety, introduced himself. He said he graduated from Johnson State College in 2000. Since then, there have been a lot of changes on campus. What hasn't changed is its core mission. It is exciting to consider what the campus will look like over the next 30 years.

3. *Open Discussion for Johnson Residents and Interested Citizens to Express Ideas*

Brady Rainville invited members of the public to talk about what they hope people are saying about VTSU Johnson in 5 years, what their top 3 priorities are, what would make the campus more vibrant, what opportunities we are missing and what questions they have.

Paul Warden asked if there has been conversation about revitalization of Dibden Hall. It seems there could be an opportunity to revitalize it through a public-private partnership. Brady said Dibden has recently been renovated. Some staff offices have moved to the upstairs of Dibden. Sherry Kollmann said those specific conversations have not happened. If that is something the community wants to look at, she will take that idea back to consider.

Peggy Williams said she thinks there should be weekly postings on Front Porch Forum to let people know about athletic or performance events, lectures, etc. at the college. She thinks that information about what is going on here is missing now.

Lynn Lehouillier said when she was a student at Johnson State, the town was thriving and the campus was full and alive. College students brought more to the town. She is heartbroken to see where Johnson has gone. How many dorms do we have on campus? Are they still in good condition? Brady said there are 3 ½ dorms. Another staff member said about 550 students can be housed on campus. Lynn said she thinks there were about 1200 students when she went there. She is wondering what else VTSU is looking to do here besides the health clinic. Sherry Kollmann said that is what they want to figure out tonight. They don't want to decide what they are doing without hearing from the community. This meeting is to find out what the community wants it to look like. Lynn asked if decisions will be made tonight. Sherry said no.

Lynn asked about existing negotiations and contracts. Beth Mauch said the college is not taking down any dorms. She said the only agreements they have are for the post office and health center, but they are talking to others. Students today are not always traditional students looking to have the traditional experience college students had historically. VTSU wants to ensure that students have robust experiences, but on a campus where they not may need all the existing infrastructure, they want to consider how to make sure the community is thriving, provide opportunities for internships, etc.

Sen. Rich Westman said this is an opportunity to look toward the future. This is about how we will transform the campus into something relevant to the community. If it is relevant to the community it will survive and do well. The campus is moving towards a lot of health programs. The chancellor has talked to the hospital about internships. That will create a pipeline for students to have jobs in this community. There is an adult daycare closing in Morrisville. With the nursing program on the Johnson campus and students who need internships, is there a role for the campus to play with adult daycare? How can we match the direction of the campus with what the community needs?

Brady said he thinks it is helpful to look at community needs and what programs might connect to those needs.

Amy Tatro said she would love to see camps for kids on campus. That would give kids a chance to get to know the campus. Brady said VTSU does currently offer camps at the Johnson campus, so there is a need to make sure information about them is shared with the community.

Kim Dunkley said we need housing, especially single family housing. Maybe VTSU could create some kind of housing on campus, maybe co-housing. Maybe empty dorms could be used. Maybe there could be an Airbnb that could give students hotel management skills. Maybe there could be a residential program that would allow residents to use the pool, etc.

Joanne Whitehill, artistic director of the Burklyn Ballet Theatre, asked people not to forget Burklyn Ballet Theatre, which has been on campus since 1986. They provide a summer camp. There are not enough summer camps on campus. She knows the soccer camp left because there were so many regulations. Burklyn Ballet Theatre has faced the same issues. They are fighting to be able to stay on campus. They bring in students from around the country and from other countries, which is valuable for the community. They provide entertainment. Their rehearsals and performances are open. She suggested not forgetting about the potential for summer revenue.

Charles Flaum said a lot of people in town felt abused and traumatized by former trustees, chancellors and presidents. People heard that Governors and Senators were going to be torn down. There has been a big disconnect between what is happening and what people are hearing. He thanked VTSU and Vermont State Colleges System administrators for coming and setting a different tone. The town needs communication from VTSU. We want to know what the plans are.

Beth Mauch said VTSU applied for a Community Development Block Grant. They did not get it, but that started conversations that are continuing. The State Colleges System has undergone great stress. The legislature provided a lot of funds to get it back on its feet. They were able to get rid of much of the structural deficit and implement a new computer system. They are seeing good enrollment numbers. They got Congressionally Directed Spending funding from Sen. Sanders to put in a nursing center on the Johnson campus and they are working to put in sim labs with state money. The legislature has provided funds for apartment style student housing on the Johnson campus. Students are looking for apartment style places. There is not a plan to tear down residence halls. They could perhaps be used for short term workforce housing. It would probably be too expensive to retrofit them to become apartments, but they believe some will be interested in using them as they are now. They have been thinking about the Johnson campus as a healthcare hub. Forty mental health graduate students and around 25 holistic health counselors graduated this year from the Johnson campus.

Mary Collins asked when the decisions discussed were made and what input was given by current students. How are students being included in what the transformation will be? What are the current degree programs? How many students are enrolled? How many courses or degree programs have been eliminated? She understands healthcare is a need, but it is not what all students want to study. Are we pushing an agenda based on workforce needs or paying attention to what high school graduates want? How many students are on campus now and how many are studying remotely? Nine colleges in Vermont have closed in the last 6 or 7 years. How many of their students were invited with any incentive to transfer to Vermont state colleges? There needs to be a process of public engagement if people are going to trust decisions, but she doesn't see that happening.

Maurice Ouimet, vice president for admissions and enrollment services, said this fall there were 26 new nursing students on campus. The number of high school students taking early college classes is growing. There are fewer students in residence halls because those new students are mostly commuter students. VTSU-Johnson continues to see a lot of success with graduate programs. There are about 360 students on campus now. Programs in addition to nursing include BFA programs,

psychology, business administration, English, early college, several graduate programs, environmental science, biology, education, math, general studies, interdisciplinary studies, and woodworking (in partnership with Vermont Woodworking School.) There was a question about whether the nursing program offers a bachelor's degree. Brady said it offers a certificate. There was a question about how many of the listed programs are online. Brady said holistic health, psychology, some education programs, business, and interdisciplinary studies are online.

Eric Nuse said he is on the steering committee for the Recreation Economy for Rural Communities (RERC) planning effort, which is looking at increasing the economic impact of outdoor assets in Johnson. One of the assets that is growing the fastest is the rail trail. The problem is that there is increased traffic on the trail, but not many people stop in Johnson for a variety of reasons. Part of the planning effort has been considering how to attract people to town, particularly to stay overnight. One potential place people could stay is the college. There are Airbnbs in town, but most have a 2 or 3 night minimum stay and people on the rail trail don't want to stay that long. We really need a hostel, hotel or motel. It sounds like there is a possibility that something could be developed on the Johnson campus. He would think a dorm could fit the need perfectly.

Faculty member Gina Mireault said she loves the idea of collaboration between the community and the campus. Many students are commuters. She thinks their needs might include after school programming for their kids so they can attend classes. That might help those in the community too. We used to have an early childcare center on campus. We don't have an early childhood program anymore, but a daycare or after school programming on campus seems like it would be win-win.

A graduate student said her program is fully online, but she lives on campus. We are talking about how the community can use buildings that are not being used, but her concern is how to get more enrollment on campus. She thinks the buildings could be used by students. Why isn't our first concern increasing enrollment? A lot of degrees are moving online. But how do we get people living on campus?

Mike Lannon said education in this country is changing. We have to be thinking about having our kids want to stay in Vermont. Kids want to be innovative and creative. Today's kids won't be deep readers; they will be innovators. We have to think outside the box. We have to think about innovation and about getting children up to the college campus from elementary school to make sure they know they can come here when they graduate from Lamoille Union.

Faculty member Julie Theoret said she was going to mention the hostel idea. She thinks it is a great idea. She does support expansion of health sciences and healthcare programs and she also thinks we can look a little to the past. Down at the bottom of the hill we have the internationally renowned Vermont Studio Center. We have to create a relationship with them. She doesn't want to lose that identity of Johnson that was the arts. Not every town has the Vermont Studio Center. She thinks it could bring students here. They could listen to lectures by world renowned artists and lecturers. And if the Studio Center doesn't have enough housing, the college would have places to stay.

Duncan Hastings said Eric Nuse's idea of space for rail trail users is really critical. He constantly hears that people are looking for places to stay along the rail trail. Increasing opportunities related to the Studio Center is a great idea. The current reality with many online classes may not last forever. He hopes we can hang on and keep the campus in good shape. Things may turn around. We may have a population in the future that wants a campus experience. He is chair of a task force

trying to save the Julian Scott house. There is a Julian Scott gallery on campus. Many people are not aware of what a historical figure Julian Scott was. He thinks we need to do a better job of shouting his name. There could be a joint effort of the town and the college to raise awareness of Scott. He understands there are 3 boxes of Julian Scott letters in the college library. He thinks they should go to the town Historical Society.

Morna Flaum said she is on the RERC steering committee. This is an amazing community. One of its most prominent blessings is access to nature and recreation opportunities. There is tremendous interest in growing the recreation economy, including recreational facilities on campus. She feels the college and town need to collaborate more strongly. Maybe a wilderness family lodge could be built on college land. The college has electricity, water, sewer and land. We might be able to find a partnership to develop on college land. She thinks there could be collaboration with local nature schools. We could promote nature education.

A community member said she spent 40 years in education in Vermont middle schools and high schools. Our kids want to learn in person with other people. When we think they want online learning, part of that is they can't afford to live on campus. Can we make it more affordable? Maybe they could work on campus to offset the cost.

Adrienne Parker said she is speaking just for herself, not the selectboard. She thinks we should zoom out and look at all our strengths as a town and a college and focus on where they overlap. She thinks maybe we could work together to hire a planner to figure out a plan to use the strengths of both the town and the college. The town needs a post office and grocery store. We have resources that are in a flood zone and having them up on the college campus would be nice, but we still need a college also. The college has a lot of land that could be built on. We could develop a new town center with the college nearby.

Kate Harney said she works in athletics at VTSU. She is excited to have the health center moving up here, but she recently called them to see if they could see a student and they don't take drop-ins so they will not see our students. There are multiple trails in Johnson, not just the rail trail – VAST, Long Trail, etc. The town is working hard to revitalize the economy through recreation. But the college doesn't have any programs that could provide recreation interns. We used to have an outdoor ed program. Smugglers' Notch is a big employer in the area and they are now owned by a company that also owns Burke Mountain Resort. The college should have a relationship with them.

Kate said the town recreation coordinator, Isabelle Sullivan, is amazing. She did a great job bringing swim lessons to the campus. But they struggled to find lifeguards. Students don't know how to swim. Many kids in this area don't have a safe place to learn to swim. When Morrisville dropped their summer camps we were asked to have summer camps here, but Kate and Isabelle don't have enough hours to work on something like that. There are not enough bodies to make great ideas happen. The men's basketball coach is working on a mentoring program. The RERC steering committee is working with Lamoille Health Partners to get a grant for that. It would be an after school program that hopefully would turn into summer camps. But it takes bodies and time to do that. There are not enough bodies and time to make ideas like bringing back the ski hill happen. She asked some student athletes if any of them are planning on staying in Vermont after they graduate. None are from here and none plan to stay. That is not necessarily a school problem. It is a Vermont problem. We do a lot to recruit out of state students to this campus, but Vermont can't hold onto them. People should want to stay after they graduate.

Isabelle Sullivan said one common theme she is hearing is communication between the town and college. A lot of the things people are looking for are already happening here. Soccer camp does happen here through Johnson recreation. There is basketball camp, ballet, swim lessons, etc. She could volunteer to be a liaison to tell the community what is happening here.

Peggy Williams said there is a tremendous amount of land between the ski hill and the maintenance center. She envisions VTSU leasing but not selling the land to a developer to put in a townhouse complex (preferably for people 50+.) People who live there could get a college ID card and have access to campus amenities.

Mark Woodward said he is over-housed. A lot of people in Vermont are. There are a lot of single people in 3 or 4 bedroom houses. He would buy a condo in Senators if he could. He would like to live there and use the gym and cafeteria. He hasn't heard anyone talk about AI tonight. That is changing the world. He wonders what education's approach will be to that. When he was on the House Education Committee, the president of IDX told him he looked for philosophy majors when he was hiring.

Margo Warden said as we talk about projects and the future she wants students to feel this is something happening with them, not to them. This is the most beautiful campus she has been on. The way the grounds are kept speaks of pride, hope, love and care.

Amy Tatro said Jenna's Promise could be a powerful partner with the college. Their mission relates to the health and wellness offerings on the campus. College students could work with Jenna's Promise to get hands-on experience. Jenna's Promise can bring in people who want to stay, which will bring more life to businesses. They may become students. This campus could offer a Betty Ford/Hazelden model that would bring in people from around New England. It would bring kids here wanting to enroll.

Laurie Persico said the college has been a great asset for the town. It is hard to keep up communication between the college and residents. She is not sure how communication can get better. It is great that we are going to have the post office up here, but there is really no place to walk on Clay Hill Road. It is hard to walk downtown from the college. She thinks the college, town and village need to think about access. She is concerned about trucks coming down the hill. If we are going to bring rail trail bicyclists up the hill, it has to be safe.

Carri Ferrari said the college has a lot of activities and they are posted, but not frequently. It feels like there is no bridge between the college and town. It feels like they are working against each other and not collaborating. We have all the elements to have a mini resort if VTSU and the town can figure out how to work together. She feels the person managing town rec programs needs to be full time. The town needs to find money to pay staff. She is hoping this effort doesn't just deflate. It feels like in the past these discussions have never gotten off the ground.

Charles Flaum said Johnson was one of 25 towns that won an RERC grant from the EPA because of what we went through with the drop in population and the flooding and what we have here. If we can just collaborate with the college we could turn this into something. But we don't have the bodies. It is hard to hire someone from around here. He asks the administration to think about

internships. VTSU-Johnson no longer has any type of rec program. We need interns from other schools to come here and help with revitalization work.

Greg Tatro said Vermont is the second oldest state in the nation. The student population is down. For the school to succeed he thinks it needs to have classes and also hands-on experience. Why not build housing for older people here? Then older people who don't want to leave Johnson could stay. Students could help check on them, take their blood pressure, etc. He thinks that would bring more students in and give them hands-on experience.

Kathy Black suggested having an outdoor education program here. Instead of a health clinic she would rather see kids get out into nature. With an outdoor education program, the college could collaborate with the town. She doesn't know why there is a need to change the dorms. It is typical for dorms to have a bathroom at the end of the hall.

Paul Warden said he is hearing a lot of things that dovetail together. There is a lot of interest in housing – a hostel, short-term rentals in dorms, longer term housing for those over 55, or just apartments on campus. Living on campus would be very attractive for a lot of people, with the SHAPE Center and the cafeteria. There is tremendous energy in town for an emphasis on recreation. The college could be a big part of that with trails and housing.

Brady encouraged people to write down their ideas and put them up on the boards in the room. He noted that one helpful thing people can do is to refer to this campus as Vermont State University when talking about it.

Margo Warden asked where people can email ideas after this meeting. Brady said they can be sent to President@VermontState.edu.

4. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 7:39.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths