

TOWN OF WHEELOCK
Public Hearing RE Declassifying Welch Rd
Tuesday 1/6/26, 5:30pm
Wheelock Town Hall and via Zoom

Present in person: Selectboard members Ann Lawless (chair), Mike Richardson and Chuck Dill; Carol and Steve Amos, Bobbie Jo and Richard Norcross, Kim Hathaway, Carol Rossi, Theresa Stimpson, Erin Swigart (clerk/treasurer), Meaghan Rinehart (recorder) and Lance Horne (of Danville). Via Zoom: Enid Ellis, Tune Faulkner and Paul Hayes and assistant of *Caledonian-Record*.

Ann called the Public Hearing to order at 5:30pm.

Ann read the statement below that had been posted on the town website and was available in the meeting. Also posted and available were copies of the VTrans Hydraulics and Hydrology study of May 15, 2025. She stated meeting guidelines, asking those present to identify their names and towns, and allowing people to speak for 2 minutes after they had been recognized by the chair, and giving priority to those who had not previously spoken and to Wheelock residents vs. those from other towns.

STATEMENT: The **purpose** of this hearing is for Wheelock residents and property owners to share their views regarding the declassification of Welch Road from a Class 4 road to a trail.

Policy: Wheelock Selectboard is following the Wheelock Class 4 Roads and Trails Policy, as stated in Section 6, Change in Classification: Class 4 highways may be reclassified to trail status, discontinued, or upgraded to class 3 or higher status. Trails may be discontinued or upgraded to class 4 or higher status. Reclassification will be done in accordance with 19 V.S.A. §§ 708-716 and upon findings by the Select Board that the public interests will be substantially advanced by such change in status and that reasonable measures are taken to replace, substitute, or avoid the loss of public and commercial travel, intrinsic aesthetic and recreational value, or other public interests afforded by the existing class 4 highway or trail.

To Prepare for the Hearing: In accordance with 19 V.S.A. §§ 708-716, the Selectboard notified all affected property owners by certified mail, conducted a site visit, and provided a written notice about this public hearing in the *Caledonian-Record*.

Background: Flooding on Welch Rd in July 2023 destroyed a culvert and in July 2024 destroyed a "logger bridge" the town built to replace the culvert. The town received a

permit and in August 2024 built a “low water crossing,” which meets the state municipal standard for Class 4 Roads. In May 2025 VTrans completed a Hydraulics and Hydrology Study at the river crossing. The study outlines the requirements for the town to build a new bridge there.

Selectboard Research-Possible Solutions: (1) FEMA allowed a cost of \$17,244 for engineering, with the town’s share 17.5% (\$3,017) but only if the town proceeded to build the design. Ballpark engineering estimates for construction range from \$500,000 to \$1M+. (2) Purchase a pre-made culvert, delivered, for \$203,000 which would require engineering, abutments and installation. (3) Use box culverts donated by VTrans, which would require transport from Montgomery VT, engineering, abutments and installation. (4) Design of a new bridge by Norwich University engineering students. Norwich declined as the site is too challenging, and they would need a licensed VT firm to stamp their design. This appears unlikely due to liability costs. And the town would have to pay for abutments and bridge construction. (5) Declassify the road into a trail. An entity other than the Town could build a new crossing. State river standards would still apply but not the more exacting municipal bridge standards. (6) Do nothing. The Town would still have liability. The Selectboard rejected options (1) to (4) because of cost and impact on taxpayers.

According to statute the Selectboard makes the decision to declassify and a townwide vote is not required.

Carol Rossi requested that the Selectboard conduct a review of all class IV and Class III roads that serve only one property and she provided a list of roads with the number of year-round and seasonal dwellings they serve. Her statement highlighted the change in town road maps over the decades and urged the selectboard to determine what are town roads. The selectboard members responded that they made great efforts to determine Town Rd #9 known as Welch Rd. All maps indicate there is no other public access to the affected parcels, and the map they focused on was approved in 2018 and has not changed since, and is the most recent map approved annually by VTrans. Ms. Rossi requested the selectboard not declassify Welch Road into a legal trail as it only accesses private land.

Steve Amos asked about other adjacent property owners. It was determined there are 3 parcels served, Peter Piper Timber, Kim Hathaway and a landlocked parcel inside Ms. Hathaway’s property. The Town notified all affected parcel owners by certified mail of the statutory declassification process. Mr. Amos questioned if all parcel owners need to agree to reclassification. Ann replied that the parcel owners need only to be notified of the process by certified mail.

Ms. Hathaway requested that those present who had not spoken give her their allotted 2 minutes. Many obliged. Ms. Hathaway spoke for 10 minutes reading aloud to the assembly. She explained the struggles she has endured because of the flooding and proposed three actions. She suggested not declassifying the road to a trail, getting taxes from other sources, and contacting the head of the Agency of Natural Resources to seek a resolution.

Richard Norcross stated that Welch is 500 yards of road and thinks the Town should throw it up. Mike stated it is a 10th of a mile of road serving limited parcels and landowners have made clear that public use is not welcome and suggested throwing up the road. (The above-mentioned map shows Welch Rd. to be .25 mi. in length.)

Ann noted that taking any action was not part of the agenda and the issue would be taken up at the next warned meeting.

Ann reminded Ms. Hathaway that reclassifying the road as a trail is a better option for her as anyone wanting to create an improved river crossing would only have to follow State Agency of Natural Resources permitting rules and not the more exacting VTrans rules for municipalities.

Chuck motioned, seconded by Ann to close the hearing. All in favor, so voted.

Before the meeting ended, Mr. Horne spoke of his experience with Ms. Hathaway and his support for her in this situation.

The meeting closed at 6:32 PM.

Submitted by Meaghan Rinehart.

Ann Lawless, chair

Mike Richardson

Chuck Dill