



# TOWN OF ST. JOHNSBURY

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## Meeting of the St. Johnsbury Select Board January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2024 @ 6:00 pm

Present-

Select Board: Steve Isham, Frank Empsall, Tracy Zschua, Dennis Smith

Staff: Chad Whitehead, Rachel Waterhouse, Stacy Jewell, Joe Kasprzak (via zoom), Chief Joel Pierce, Chief Bradley Reed, Lesley Russ (via zoom), Kate Bent (via zoom), Kresten Sterling, Felicia Mallett (via zoom)

Public: KATV, Jim Brown, Gillian Sewake, Don Smith, Lenny Geardi, Lauren Jarvi, Lyle Gadapee, Susan Gadapee, St. Johnsbury Community Hub- Juliette (via zoom)

### Agenda Amendments:

- None

### Public Comment:

- Lyle Gadapee approached the Select Board regarding a letter to the editor he read in the Caladonian Record. He inquired about the transfer of \$150,000 from the General Fund to the Special Services District in the proposed 24-25 budget. He expressed his understanding that the Town had voted to not have police coverage outside of the Special Services District. Chad explained that he was going to address Lyle's question during the budget presentation.

### Warrants:

- On a motion by Dennis and second by Tracy to approve the warrants as presented. All in favor.

### Minutes:

- On a motion by Dennis and second by Tracy to approve the minutes from the Jan. 8<sup>th</sup> meeting as presented. All in favor.

### Liquor/Tobacco License:

- Frank presented the following liquor and tobacco renewals:
  - Northeast Cannabis LLC- Tobacco
  - Northeast Cannabis LLC- Tobacco substitute
- Frank presented the following new liquor and tobacco requests:
  - Pam Petty- 2<sup>nd</sup> Class
  - Pam Petty- Tobacco
- Dennis asked if Pam Petty was Petty Co. Stacy said yes.

- On a motion by Dennis and second Tracy to approve the liquor and tobacco licenses as presented. All in favor.

#### Budget Presentation:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager provided an overview of the proposed budget for 2024-2025 and the budget development process. The proposed budget impact on taxes inside the special services district is a 4.79% increase and outside the special services is 4.66% increase. He explained that there are no unusually large increase in any of the Town's department budgets. He explained that the Town anticipates seeking 3.4 million in revenue outside of taxes.
- He explained that the proposed budget can be found on the Town website or he had hard copies for anyone interested in one. He highlighted the changes to the budget since the last meeting including an increase in VMERS contributions in the Police Department and an increase in use of unobligated general reserve funds from \$150,000 to \$200,000.
- Following the public input meeting the budget will go to the Select Board for approval and then be sent to the voters for Town Meeting. Tax rates would then be set in August of 2024.
- Chad explained that three years ago the Town began transferring funds from the General Fund to the Special Services District. The first year the transfer was based on the number of calls the Police Department responded to outside of the special services district. The last two years the transfer has been based on 10% of the Police Departments budget. The Police Department does benefit those people that live outside of the special services district. Chad explained that St. Johnsbury Police are automatic response for State Police when body or property damage is reported they must respond even if it is outside of the special services district. Most times when St. Johnsbury Police Department is responding to assist State Police they are the first on scene. He also provided an example of the coverage students from outside of the special services district get when they attend school within the special services district and highlighting those who work inside the special services district also get those services. Chad explained that the Town has been transparent with the transfer from the general fund to the special services district over the years.
- Lyle Gadapee mentioned that he didn't realize it was happening until he read the letter to the editor in the Caledonian Record. He mentioned that residents should have been notified somehow and provided some kind of explanation. He went on to say that residents outside of the special services district voted and took on a responsibility of not have police service. Now those outside the special services district seem to be getting police coverage when they didn't vote to have it in the first place.
- Chad explained that town wide policing would need to be a discussion with large public input.
- Lyle Gadapee explained that the protection of the kids in school seems like a moot point as the schools are within the district.
- Steve Isham explained that it seemed like it was a fundamental issue and the question is if the transfer from the general fund to the special services district is allowed by the current Town Charter. He expressed that he believes under the charter the transfer can happen. It was mentioned that the vote regarding police coverage for the Town took place back in the 1960s and St. Johnsbury is a much different place now. Currently the St. Johnsbury PD is responding to about 1 call a week outside of the special services district. He went on to mention for around \$30 per hundred thousand to know that if his life was at stake he was not going to have to wait hours for someone to respond.
- Lyle Gadapee expressed that the town's people voted to not have this done. He expressed that he thought it either needed to be changed or that the PD doesn't respond.
- Lenny Gerardi insisted that the Select Board delete the transfer of \$150,000 from the general fund to the special services district. He went on to mention that if there is any question what so ever if it

is allowed under the current charter that they really should not have that line item in there. In good faith he stated that it should be removed, looked into and brought back next year if allowed.

- Steve Isham said that there was no question in his mind and that he believes the transfer is allowed under the current charter.
- Lenny Gerardi stated that the Town is not billing other towns for Town services like plow routes and emergency calls. He mentioned that the Northeast Kingdom has the highest murder rate in VT however does the Town still feel it is their moral obligation to respond to Danville? He inquired if an emergency was to happen in the industrial park if Lyndonville would address it. Lenny stated that he believes the rationale presented is pretty weak. He believes that this is a big deal and needs a lot more public discussion.
- On a motion by Steve Isham and second by Dennis to approve the proposed 2024-2025 budget as presented with the confirmation that the Town can transfer \$150,000 from the general fund to the special services district per the charter. All in favor.
- Dennis explained that they could get a petition signed to ask the Town to remove the transfer of the \$150,000 from the general fund to the special services district however it would be needed ahead of time as the Town would need to plan the budget accordingly.
- Lyle Gadapee mentioned that he assumed it would not be an issue as it had been voted on in the past.
- Dennis mentioned that the Select Board would not propose or approve if they didn't think it was allowed by the current charter.
- Stacy mentioned that if the budget needs to be amended that it needs to be done as soon as possible as the ballots need to go to the printer by Monday Jan. 29<sup>th</sup>.
- Dennis mentioned that an email from the attorney would be fine and then if a meeting is needed a special meeting can be scheduled.

#### Building Up Neighborhoods Presentation:

- Gillian Sewake, Discover St. Johnsbury Director and Juliette from St. Johnsbury Community Hub provided a presentation regarding building up neighborhoods program. The program is looking to identify community members who may wish to help make community connects and develop community plans. The goal is to create stronger and more welcoming space by creating bonds in the community. Hoping that by the summer community groups will have a project or two going.
- Those interested in learning more can reach out to Juliette via email at [stjcommunityhub@gmail.com](mailto:stjcommunityhub@gmail.com), via phone at 802-535-1985 via their Facebook or Instagram accounts.
- Grant funding has been awarded for this project through VT Community Foundation. Working sessions are being held Wednesday Evenings at 6 pm at the St. Johnsbury Community Hub.
- Jim Brown mentioned that in 1991 when he and his family moved to St. Johnsbury there was a welcoming committee. He explained how much they appreciated it. He suggested that something along these lines might be a good project.
- Juliette mentioned that the New Ave building has been discussing when new tenants move in providing them with a welcome package that would include helpful information. She explained that she is constantly having community conversations to understand what is needed.

#### Dispatch Reserve Request:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager explained that Dispatch was awarded \$213,909 in a Homeland Security Grant to expand the St. Johnsbury radio system. He explained that the Town's match for

the grant is \$8,100 which has been built into dispatch reserves for this project. He explained that the Select Board would need to give authorization to use \$8,100 from dispatch reserves as the match for the Homeland Security Grant.

- Frank commented that it seemed pretty straight forward.
- On a motion by Dennis and second by Tracy to authorize the use of \$8,100 in dispatch reserves as the Town's cost for the radio expansion project. All in favor.

#### Fairbanks Inn Settlement:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager explained that the Town has been in legal proceedings with the Fairbanks Inn since August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022 when the Town issued a notice of violation to the Fairbanks Inn for operating a temporary overnight shelter which the Town claimed violated the Zoning Code of Ordinance. He explained that since the DRB upheld the notice of violation the Town has been in mediation with the Fairbanks Inn. During the middle of 2023 the VT legislation passed S-100 which becomes effective Dec. 1, 2024 at which point the Town would no longer be able to penalize the hotel for housing folks through the voucher program.
- The Town and Fairbanks Inn have come to an agreement for a settlement which includes the following.
  - The Town of St. Johnsbury will rescind the Notice of Violation.
  - The Fairbanks Inn will provide 24/7 staffing to address the security and operational needs of the property.
  - Up until Act 47 is in effect the hotel will have available 50% of the rooms for traveling tourists.
  - Fairbanks Inn will pay the Town of St. Johnsbury \$7,000.
- Frank asked if with the settlement this goes away. Chad said yes we move on.
- On a motion by Dennis and second by Tracy to accept the settlement with the Fairbanks Inn as presented. All in favor.

#### Town Manager's Report:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager provided the following Town Manager's Report.
- Working on compiling all the information needed for the Town Report. The Town Report this year will not be completed by the Caledonian Record. Chad explained that the Town has ordered 750 hard copies and will also have a digital copy available online.
- Stacy explained that the hard copies would need to be available by Feb. 26<sup>th</sup>.
- CWSRF and DWSRF Priority List applications have been submitted. The projects on the application include Railroad Street, Portland Street and Bay Street.
- Lenny Gerardi asked Chad if he has been involved in any ongoing discussion regarding Calnex and the St. Johnsbury Fire Department.
- Chad explained that there is ongoing conversation regarding Calnex and the St. Johnsbury Fire Department. He explained that the executive team has reviewed their finances however still have a few things they want to understand before making a recommendation. Chad explained that the 2024-2025 proposed budget only includes the contracted amount and doesn't include a merger. If the Town was to move forward with the Calnex merger the budget would need to be amended and a vote from the voters would be needed.
- Stacy Jewell asked if a new contract has been signed at the updated price. Chad said that the new contract will remain month to month at this time like all the other contracts for the surrounding communities.

- Dennis asked about legislation changes regarding billable services for ambulances. Chad explained that payer amounts for Medicare and Medicaid were being discussed along with services being able to charge for non-transport now. He explained that this will financially help capture more revenue.
- Lyle Gadapee asked if the Callex and Fire Department merger were to take place if services would still continue outside of St. Johnsbury. Chad said yes however the Town of St. Johnsbury would be in control over that.

Other Business:

- Jim Brown provided an update on the bylaw modernization and what the Planning Commission continues to work on. Projected at least a year timeline before changes are ready for the Select Board.

On a motion by Dennis and second by Tracy the board adjourned by unanimous decision.