



TOWN OF ST. JOHNSBURY

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Meeting of the St. Johnsbury Select Board March 10th, 2025 @ 6:00 pm

Present-

Select Board: Steve Isham, Frank Empsall, Dennis Smith, Brendan Hughes, Tracy Zschau

Staff: Chad Whitehead, Rachel Waterhouse, Lesley Russ, Stacy Jewell, Matthew Walsh

Public: KATV, Jim Brown, Ben Copans, Richard Boisseau, Issiah, Lauren (via zoom), Jim Brown (via zoom), Peter Schwergert, Greg Jackwauh

Agenda Amendments:

- None

Public Comment:

- None

Minutes:

- On a motion by Dennis and second by Frank to approve the Select Board minutes from Feb. 24th, 2025 with the noted correction. All in favor.

Warrants:

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

Liquor Licenses/ Tobacco Licenses:

- Steve Isham presented the following liquor licenses and tobacco licenses.
 - RL Operating- 2nd class
 - Sams- 1st and 3rd class
- On a motion by Dennis and second by Frank to approve the liquor licenses and tobacco licenses as presented. All in favor. Brendan abstained.

Bylaw Modernization Public Hearing:

- Steve Isham opened the Bylaw Modernization Public Hearing for public comment.

- Greg Jackwauh expressed concerns about the impact of new farm regulations on zoning and property rights. Jim Brown, Planning Commission Chair explained that the bylaws are being updated to comply with state requirements and streamline permitting processes.
- Richard Lyons, Chair of the Development Review Board, provided detailed feedback on several aspects of the proposed bylaws, including notification periods, the Design Advisory Committee's role, and criteria for the Development Review Board. He suggested further review of these areas before approval.
- The discussion continued with focus on concerns about agricultural zoning regulations in the proposed bylaws. Rich Lyons expressed concern that the current definition of agriculture is too broad, potentially allowing agricultural activities in all zones without proper regulation. He suggested better defining agricultural practices and structures, particularly for smaller-scale operations like chicken coops.
- There was discussion regarding the extent of the state mandates on agricultural zoning and discussion on potential ways to regulate agriculture uses, such as through setback requirements or USDA registration.
- Greg Jackwauh expressed how radical it was to change the zoning since Vermont is a farm state and there are farms everywhere. He explained that such regulations do not exist anywhere else in the country.
- Matt Walsh, Zoning Administrator explained that the way other Towns regulate the agricultural piece is by addressing RAPs. He explained that the DRB can regulate use in downtown and residential zones. He included that this is new in Vermont and there isn't a lot of information out there on it yet.
- Tracy explained that it would be best to look into RAPs as a RAP defines what a farm is and the smallest farm is a minimum of 4 acres. She expressed that she felt clarity would save a lot of headaches.
- Steve Isham suggested that since the State has mandated this that the Planning Commission speak with the State to determine their definition.
- Rich Lyons also raised concerns about definitions for emergency shelters and specialized housing in the bylaws.
- Stacy Jewell, Town Clerk strongly suggested that shall vs. will be closely looked at before approving the bylaw modernization. She expressed that the Town has not been compliant for the last 15-20 years.
- Rich Lyons mentioned that he understands that the Planning Commission and Town wish to be compliant but urged the Planning Commission to take the items presented tonight under consideration. He explained that while it has not been approved yet the DRB can make considerations based on the proposed bylaw modernization as it is in progress.
- On a motion by Frank and second by Dennis to close the Bylaw Modernization Public Hearing. All in favor.

2025 Local Emergency Management Plan:

- Chad Whithead, Town Manager explained that annually the Town comes to the Select Board with the updated Local Emergency Management Plan for approval. He explained that this year all that was updated was the contacts. He explained how the plan works and that staff look to the plan when local emergencies arise. He gave an example of the flooding events in July of 2024.
- Dennis mentioned that #3 Utility Partners should be removed and replaced with the Town WWTF and that the contact for #6 the shelter should be changed to Paul Shatner.

- Chad explained that the Town would make the edits and bring back to the Select Board at the April 14th meeting.

Bylaw Modernization:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager explained that his observation was that the Bylaw Modernization is valuable and needed but a few items need to be reviewed before final approval. He explained that he is an advocate for maintaining local control where the Town can and still stay within compliance at the State level. He expressed that animal complaints are very challenging and time consuming so addressing the agriculture definition is beneficial.
- Steve Isham mentioned that he wished these concerns had come up earlier for the Planning Commission.
- Ben Copans mentioned that it would have been helpful to have them come up at the Planning Commission Public Hearing and not at this hearing.
- On a motion by Dennis and second by Frank to table the Bylaw Modernization until there is clarity regarding the definitions and will vs. shall. All in favor.
- Steve Isham confirmed with the Planning Commission that they were clear on what the Board was looking for. Jim Brown mentioned that he would wait to hear from Matt Walsh, Zoning Administrator on the definition of agriculture.

Town Plan Update:

- Steve Isham, Select Board Chair mentioned that the Select Board will be hosting a Public Hearing for the Town Plan at the April 14th Select Board meeting.
- Jim Brown, Planning Commission Chair explained that the Planning Commission has prepared a revised version of the 2017 Town Plan, updating outdated sections while retaining relevant parts. This update aims to maintain Act 250 exemptions for housing projects in the designated downtown areas, which can significantly reduce costs for developers. The revised plan incorporates input from stakeholders and addresses current state requirements. The Planning Commission presents updates on the town plan, discussing the need for permanent exemptions from Act 250 and exploring new center designations for areas like East St. Johnsbury. They address questions about the implications of these designations for residents, noting potential benefits such as grant eligibility and tax credits for businesses. The commission also discusses the need to address short-term housing supply in future iterations of the plan.
- Jim Brown mentioned that the proposed Town Plan is a revision of the 2017 Town Plan and he believes it has good value.
- Dennis asked if the one presented was the final draft or would need further edits. Jim Brown mentioned that the Planning Commission is working towards a May 8th approval deadline with the understanding that additional changes can be made later if needed. Ben Copans mentioned that it does have some temporary exemptions until 2027 with regards to Act 181. He expressed that he wants the Town Plan to represent the Town well.
- Steve Isham asked about page 4 and 5 with regards to the regional urban centers and what that means. Ben Copans mentioned that this was a key point to evaluate and consider.
- Steve Isham asked about designations and what it means. Ben Copans and Matthew Walsh explained that designations help ID redevelopment within the neighborhoods. Chad explained that previous the Town had been broken into neighborhoods and had designated groups this made some Act 250 requirements exempt and provided tax credits.

- Richard Boisseau asked if that was ever discussed with regards to St. J Center. Jim Brown explained that designated neighborhoods were discussed in 2017-2018 and it was decided to not move forward with it for St. J Center.
- Brendan inquired about the how Plan addressed Short Term Rentals and looking into the future of these rentals in St. Johnsbury. He mentioned that he did not see this addressed in the Town Plan. Jim Brown expressed that Short Term Rentals are a reality. He included that housing was critical back in the 1972 plan as well. Ben Copans mentioned that was a good opportunity to identify an area within Town for STRS. Thanked Brendan for this great suggestion.
- Jim Brown also mentioned that the Fire Station was on the topics of things to be addressed in the 2017 plan and it is something that still needs to be worked on. Chad and Joe are aware of it and the given need.
- Greg Jackwauh expressed that the Barnet Town Plan was revised by NVDA and included walkability but the Town has no sidewalks. He explained that NVDA's help is all well and good but St. Johnsbury needs to make the Town Plan theirs personally and not all technical.
- Steve Isham mentioned that St. Johnsbury is very active in the revision of the Town Plan and is making it specific to the St. Johnsbury community.
- Greg Jackwauh mentioned that Act 250 is not as bad as most think it is. It is an important and engaging process.
- Steve Isham thanked the Planning Commission, Matt Walsh, Joe Kasprzak and Chad Whitehead for all their work on the 2025 Town Plan and expressed that he is looking forward to the Public Hearing on April 14th.

VCDP Grant Application- Caledonia Food Cooperative:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager explained that the Caledonia Food Co-op is looking to apply for a VCDP grant through the Town. He explained that it would be a pass through grant where the Town would be the applicant but all funds would pass through directly to the Co-op as the sub-awardee.
- Peter Schwergert from the Co-op explained that the Co-op would take care of the administration of the grant. The application is due 2 weeks from today and the decision will be made at the VCDP board meeting on July 5th. He explained that the VCDP funds are very competitive and the Co-op is working to put their best foot forward. A public hearing will take place next week.
- On a motion by Dennis and second by Brendan to approve the VCDP grant application and designate Joe Kasprzak and Chad Whitehead as the administrators of the grant.

Letter of Support for NEKCV:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager presented the Select Board with a letter of support for NEKCV. He explained that NEKCV is applying for a broadband grant and was looking for a letter of support from the Town. If awarded it would provide funds to add fiber to 172 addresses in St. Johnsbury with a total of 38.2 feet of new fiber optics. He asked the Select Board to consider signing the letter.
- On a motion by Frank and second by Tracy to sign the letter of support for NEKCV broadband grant application. All in favor.

Town Manager's Report:

- Chad Whitehead, Town Manager provided the following Town Manager's Report.

- Paul Luciano has been hired as a consultant to assist the Town with the FEMA Buyout program. He has provided the Town with recommended eligibility criteria. Chad reinforced that the property that is bought out would have a deed restriction placed on it and that the property would have be reverted back to flood plain. Hoping to bring more information to the Select Board soon.
- The Public Safety Enhancement Taskforce meets tomorrow with the state to discuss next steps. They have reviewed the Town's call data since 2022 which has shown that 11% of calls have come from the same 20 people within the community and is mostly crisis calls. Hoping to work with the Taskforce to see how the Police Department can be freed up from these type of calls. Chad mentioned that the 11% of calls is more than most towns within the state. He explained that these 30 partners meet twice a month and are working on addressing these types of calls.

Other Business:

- Steve Isham expressed condolences to Larry Dolan on the passing of his wife.
- Steve Beauregard, Director of Public Works mentioned that Breezy Hill Road from Hospital Drive to Route 5 would be closed from Tuesday March 25th starting at 8 am until the evening of Wednesday March 26th for repairs.

Executive Session:

- None

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

March 24th Select Board Meeting Video:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/zzOpDRrwDjjq4ndFzm-iADMH3fVXweTgceBa7ytMF7QzIMaxAaI6-HAwB9IB4vuu.tYCfstf8VMCewXHR>

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