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Selectmen's Meeting Minutes

Monday, January 22, 2024

At the Selectmen's Meeting held on Monday, January 22, 2024 at 6:30 p.m. the following Board members were in attendance: John Tholl, Abbey Querrard, and Shawn White.

Chairperson Tholl called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

Abbey Querrard led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Others in Attendance: There were approximately 65 people in attendance.

Old Business:

New Business:

Marianne Borowski – Ammonoosuc Rail Trail Extension and Twin State Railroad Rails-to-Trails Project Presentation

Marianne Borowski, President of the Cross Adventure Trail gave a presentation on the Twin State Railroad Rails-to-Trails Project. Tom Sexton, Northeast Regional Director of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy was also in attendance. Marianne said Tom has been very helpful with the TSRR project, heading up the VT and NH TSRR, working with groups and securing funding for preliminary field work/paperwork.

--35 Mile Vermont & NH Rail Trail Connection along the Ammonoosuc and Lamoille Valley Rail Trails.

--Unique collaboration between Snowmobile Clubs and Non-Motorized Trail Users

--Objective is Restoration and Establishment of the Twin State Rail Trail

--Goal is four seasons of recreational use on this corridor

The Reason for this Presentation:

--The TSRR group asks the Town of Whitefield to consider supporting this project.

--Asking for a letter of support for Federal and State agencies: NHDOT, NHBOT, STB and for any grant sources.

--Not asking for money

--Shared maps of the project showing 21 miles are in Vermont from St. Johnsbury into Gilman. 14 miles are here in NH from Wing Road to Whitefield to Dalton, then over the Connecticut River bridge into Gilman. NH DOT owns all of that. They have worked closely with Clinton Savage of the Bureau of Rails and Trails. They have been taking the track up from Littleton to northern Bethlehem and the rest will come up in the spring from Wing Road all the way to Littleton so there will be no tracks and ties.

--This project was initiated by Snowmobile Clubs and the NH Bureau of Trails. It is a unique collaboration between NH and VT snowmobile clubs. They are interested in this because they want to restore sections of the rail corridor that are unusable due to washouts and tree growth. They want to remove the rails/ties to safely use the corridor in low snow seasons. The snowmobile season can be extended if we can get rid of those ties and rails. It connects NH to VT snowmobile networks.

--The New England Rail Trail Network has 1000 miles of rail trail network connectivity. Work on helping people piece together the rail trails.

--The TSRR Corridor is owned by the NHDOT and will stay owned by NHDOT. It is a privilege to use this property. Requested the Commissioner of the NHDOT for permission to initiate this Rails-To-Trails project and received a positive response. It is not a fast process. They are concerned that we keep their right-of-way in good shape, which we are going to do.

--Who is will manage and maintain the rail trail? NH Bureau of Trails. Towns are not responsible for maintenance.

--What's the Plan? Rail corridor survey; Rail Bed Conditions and Historical RR Artifacts; will have findings available on GIS. UNH Civil Engineering students (as part of their 2023 UNH Civil and Environmental Engineering Capstone Project) have been out for a Preliminary Engineering Study focusing on Whitefield to Dalton, 5.4 miles. They will give us an estimate of costs and work to be accomplished.

--This will truly be a four-season recreation corridor. Marianne has been and talked to Dalton, Bethlehem, the Whitefield Planning Board. Whitefield will be most to benefit from this project. Whitefield is a Stopover Town on the NH adventure trail. These cyclists are passing through this town. Opportunity for economic development for more of these things. Whitefield has been the center of railroads: Two Historic Rail Corridors Run Right Through Town, Ball Signal and Diamon are Historic Treasures. Consistent with 2019 Whitefield Master Plan. Trail users will not be using parking spaces.

--Asking Whitefield to consider supporting this rail trail and restoration of the rail corridor for 4 seasons of recreation activity. Also consider being a sponsor on our future large grant applications. Feel Whitefield would be the best choice to sponsor this and achieve the benefits from it.

--They want to let everyone know we are working on this and haven't given up on it. Marianne said she is happy to answer any questions or concerns anyone may have so they can incorporate those into their planning in the lobby after this presentation.

Public Hearing Regarding Unanticipated Funds - \$14,573.07 from NH Department of Transportation One-Time Bridge Payment

The Board of Selectmen is holding this Public Hearing pursuant to NH RSA 31:95-b, to discuss the acceptance and expenditure of unanticipated money in the amount of \$14,573.07 from the New Hampshire Department of Transportation for a Special One Time Bridge Payment in accordance with House Bill 2, Payment for Maintenance, Construction, or Reconstruction of municipally owned bridges.

These funds provide funding with restricted uses, meaning that it may be used to supplement (not supplant) local budgets. This provision requires that these funds must add to (supplement) and

not replace (supplant) local budgeted funds when providing services that repair, maintain, and construct municipal bridges. This is surplus in the state budget, and they spread it back to the local towns.

A motion was made by Abbey Querrard to accept and expend this unanticipated money in the amount of \$14,573.07 from the NH Department of Transportation for a Special One Time Bridge Payment in accordance with House Bill 2, Payment for Maintenance, Construction, or Reconstruction of municipally owned bridges. The motion was seconded by Shawn White. All in favor, 3-0. Motion passes.

Shawn asked Rob Larson, Public Works Director to check to make sure if we can use these funds towards the purchase of the sidewalk plow equipment.

Rick Albert – Re: Dunkin Donuts Project/Town Parking Lot

Rick Albert, owner of Dunkin Donuts, participated via conference call. The Board said they had some questions that have been asked before we bring this forth at town meeting.

Shawn said there have been concerns about the parking out back where the barn is located. Is that going to be able to be used for municipal parking or is it just for his business. Rick said there are 21 spots proposed. He is happy with anyone parking there for municipal purposes. How many spaces does Rick need for his building? He said 5 angle parking spots for the Dunkin Donuts and four spaces for the apartment parking. That whole area where the barn is will be for parking. He said two spots on the left near the property line and one adjacent to the barn.

Shawn said when we first spoke, Rick was going to maintain the parking lot. There are concerns about the parking lot being privately owned rather than town-owned. Would Rick be ok with him building the parking lot and the town maintaining it? Rick said he would be ok with that. Abbey asked if there a possibility for more parking spaces? Rick said those currently are planned to be 9-foot wide parking spaces. He might be able to squeeze out another two or three if they play with it. There has been some concern that there are 40 spaces now and people are concerned with spaces that are left. Abbey asked if the parking lot will be lighted? Rick said he will put lighting in the parking lot.

The Board asked Rick if he wanted the Board to go forward with vote on this at town meeting? Rick said that is his intention and that he would like to proceed with that. Rick left the meeting at this time.

Shawn opened the floor for discussion.

Steve Marro asked if there are plans drawn up for this. Shawn said Judy will get copies of the plan to Steve.

Dave Clifford asked:

--Has the town consulted with a commercial real estate broker or attorney to see if the town's best interest is being considered? Because this is a valuable asset.

--How have we decided this individual gets preferential treatment over anyone else who may want it?

How does this affect the other commercial property owners who would like to offer their property to sell or least to Dunkin'?

Have we consulted with NH DOT to see if there needs to be a traffic study done in order to grant the necessary access? Dave said he would like to request that a historic review be requested for project review.

Shawn said in response to the first question: The deed is worded that if the town ever sold the property the money would go into the Stiles Scholarship Fund. If the town sells it, we don't get any money from it. We have spoken with the town attorney about what we can do. Have not consulted with a commercial real estate agent.

How have we decided this individual gets preferential treatment over anyone else who may want it?

Shawn said that Mr. Albert approached the Board about doing a land swap. The Board spoke about this, and we don't want to be in the business of running a parking lot. There are vehicles left there for long periods of time. It is an enforcement issue. There is a lot of structure under that property. The foundation of that building is in that location. We discussed it with him, and he is agreeable to maintain the parking lot and allow the residents to use it to park. Shawn said for 20+ years of living and working in Whitefield, all he ever listens to for years is to bring businesses to the center of town. This is something that will bring people to the center of town. Businesses can't get cars to stop. This business will get cars to turn off and visit the common area and hopefully bring more business to town. The Board sees this as a way to bring something to the center of town and visit other things in town.

How does this affect the other commercial property owners who would like to offer their property to sell or least to Dunkin'?

Shawn said there will be a net loss of 23 parking spaces. There is another municipal parking lot behind the bank. There are quite a few open spots there every night. There are no spaces drawn on that lot so people don't park correctly. We are not doing away with the parking ban. Shawn said there are also three parking spaces on Jefferson Road. One person said he has always parked behind Cumberland Farms and did not know there was parking available behind the bank. How many residents use that parking lot now? Shawn said we don't know how many residents use it. There will be half the amount of parking spaces if this project goes forward.

Peter Corey said he is speaking in favor of the development. There are good things happening downtown with the Allard Block and 12 King Square upgrades. We have a business who is willing to invest a lot of money to put up a structure that will look good. The parking lot is not generating any income, and it is basically an eye sore. Union Street is going to be getting a rehab. Peter said he is one of the owners of 12 King Square, and they just did a lot line adjustment to create 3 to 4 parking spaces behind their building for their tenants, which were not there before. Peter said when he travels on Union Street, that as far as traffic goes in front of

Dunkin Donuts it is a traffic nightmare. Peter said he speaks in favor of this development and commends the Board for their innovation for getting money out of this project.

Bob Loiacono said the deed when Bob gave that to the town says: in the event the Town ever sells the premises, then the net proceeds therefrom shall be deposited into the Robert Stiles, Jr. Memorial Scholarship Fund. It also states any sale of the premises by the Town of Whitefield shall be at its fair market value. If you do a swap instead of a sale, don't you think Bob Stiles is going to say he wants \$35,000. Bob said there are 38 cars parked out there this morning. Bob said we will be taking the parking from 40 of our neighbors and handing it to an out of state business person. You can't say it is a new business. You can see it from he wants to move from.

How many apartments will be added in addition to the Dunkin Donuts? Two apartments are planned.

Concern about the landfill and traffic patterns—is this project part of that master plan? Shawn White said that DOT is not looking into putting a traffic circle on Route 116. Shawn has spoken to them about and they are looking to rehab the bridge—no plans for a traffic circle.

Rick Wright said he has concerns about the loss of parking. When that property was donated to the town, it was donated for the purpose of a municipal parking lot. Now with this proposal we are going to lose half of the parking down there. Biggest problem in regards to attracting businesses is there is no parking. Shawn said Jared Cape did a survey/study a few years ago, and it came back that people thought parking was adequate and we didn't need more parking. Rick Wright said he has heard parking is a big issue. That is the biggest issue he has loss of parking and potential on parking. Rick said there was also an issue with a restriction on the deed.

Shawn said we had quite a few public hearings and the problem was there was a right of way that wouldn't allow us to extend the parking in that area. We didn't have control in that area. There were plans to beautify the parking area, but the grants we couldn't get because of the easements. We went to the homeowners who had the easements and we discussed and went back and forth. We got rid of that 40 foot right of way, and now there is a regular right of way. With that 40-foot right of way, the town had four parking spaces that we maintained—plowing and up-keep. That area is now their property. 18 feet was added to their property.

Tom Ladd asked where exactly is the curbing around the common? Shawn said around the grass area—where the white rocks used to be. Tom said he feels that would do nothing but make it look ugly and take away from parking and unloading in that area for events on the common.

Steve Hagerty said the town value of that parking lot is \$41,000 so he is getting off good for \$35,000. How do you guarantee he is going to do what he says? Shawn said currently no tax revenue is generated from that property. The \$35,000 was a minimum estimate of upgrading the common.

Bob Loiacono said isn't it the Board's fiduciary duty to get the most amount possible, and the most amount is just one guy saying what he will do. Shawn said any agreement that would be made and done through our attorney. He is going to build and maintain a parking lot for

municipal parking. There are 40 unlined spaces currently there. We are losing spaces, about 19 spaces but there are also spaces behind the bank that are not being used.

Sondra Brekke asked if there would be more revenue generated for the town if Dunkin Donuts goes in there? Shawn said we will get tax revenue, which we are not getting any tax revenue for that property at this time.

Don Laplante said he is the Vice Chair of the Conservation Commission and the Commission is concerned that we put in a stipulation that he consults with the Conservation Commission to avoid run off into the John's River. Shawn said that is a shoreland protection area, and he will be required to go through the planning board process including the Conservation Commission process. If he owns that property, he will pay property taxes on the land and whatever he builds there. The barn will be torn down. Peter Corey said several years when we were looking at a project to rehab the barn, an engineering review was done, and they found it was in such a state of disrepair, that it would be best to be torn down in terms of value. He is going to incorporate some of the wood of that barn into the new structure to keep some of the history. It had been left so long without any maintenance done.

Bob Loiacono said the Town came and started eminent domain against them for their 40 foot right of way because the Town needed more parking down town – what has changed? Shawn said people wanted to make that parking lot better. It is an eyesore. It is dirt, full of potholes and no maintenance done on it.

Peter Corey said since we now have a businessman who wants to build a structure there it will be a good use of the property. We have been unable to come to grips with rehabilitating that parking lot, and now we have someone who wants to utilize that space for something else.

Sondra asked about the people living in the apartment buildings around the common will lose their parking? Shawn said that it might not be as convenient but there is municipal parking lot behind the bank. Shawn said Bob Stiles was sick of dealing with the issues with the abutters and the 40-foot right of way so he gave it to the town so he didn't have to deal with it any longer.

Peter Corey said he works in St. Johnsbury and parking is a problem there as well. The apartment dwellers are issued a parking permit that is issued by town, which there is a fee for. There are rules for the use of the parking lot as well.

Liz Cavannaugh said she can't imagine carrying your groceries, children, and belongings from the bank parking lot to the apartment building on Main Street. Suggested to reach out to Dave Scalley to see if he would be agreeable to let them use his spaces.

Peter said that as a taxpayer, he does not feel that the taxpayers should be paying to provide parking for private buildings. St. Johnsbury has created a permitting process for those tenants who don't have parking at those buildings. There is an expense and a cost because the town is using taxpayer money to maintain that lot. There is a way to accommodate people in a way that is right for the taxpayer and accommodates people living in apartments. We have more apartments than we used to. There is a way to accommodate this, but the town shouldn't be building parking lots for private tenant use.

How does this action affect other property owners? Any money paid to the Town would not benefit the town. Mr. Albert would try to beautify the town. \$35,000 would cover tip downs for cross walks, no concrete to the crosswalks, make the common more accessible and beautify the common with curbing. In lieu of buying the property, it is something he will do.

Library Budget Review

The Board met with the library board (Beth Anderson, Katy Kopp, Sondra Brekke, Judi Gessner, and Cathy Atwood) to discuss the library budget request for 2024. Courtney Vashaw, participated via conference call. Beth said they wanted to go over what issues the Board has with the library budget. Shawn said no big issues. The problem is we don't have the money. The school went up \$1.90 last year and we are looking at a \$3.00 increase for the school in 2024. Town went down last year, but with the increases we have currently we are projecting a town increase of approximately \$1.54. Shawn said the focus this year to keep the work force we have and be able to attract people to want to work here when we do have openings. The Department Heads were informed of that before the budget process started. The Board feels the library increase was nothing we had to do in one year. 2023 we increased the library by \$15,325. Beth said that the main item they have on their budget is for payroll. The library has never had a full-time person before, and the Select Board looks at the library as a special entity, whether they are hired by the library board or not. Beth thinks that this is an error. They feel the library employee would be eligible for town benefits, i.e. health insurance, retirement. They know that other towns have been able to enroll the library employees on the town health insurance and benefits. They have a really good person that they want to keep, and to keep her they need to offer health insurance. Courtney said she is only being paid half of what she is worth. Courtney said she has been able to find grant funding to pay for some of that, and Courtney did not take all her salary, and it is not sustainable for her to be the part-time person not making any money. Courtney said to pay someone what she does in writing grants and keep track of the grants, it would be \$140 an hour. They are reliant on volunteer labor and grant funding. Courtney is working as hard as she can to make this work. The library saves people money. Their contribution to the town economy was \$317,000 in costs that were saved with services provided to people in 2023. Return on investment is pretty good if we can keep it at a reasonable cost for everyone. Growth is hard and we are trying to scale it up slowly. Courtney said they will continue to ask for what they need, and they know it is going to come in increments. Eventually we have to get to where it is closer. Shawn said that is how it is in all departments. Peter, when he was on the Board, cautioned the library years ago about making and growing the library and where the monies are going to come from. We have raised their appropriation, and we are getting there but not all the way there. Abbey pointed out that we also took on paying for the heat and electricity. The library said if all departments are asking to cut back, then they are willing to take their share, as long as they not being cut more than their fair share. Shawn said he has gone through the budget again and is going to suggest \$100,000 more in cuts tonight. We are cutting everywhere, not just the library.

The biggest concern the library has is their full-time employee not being able to get any benefits, especially health insurance--can't offer her any benefits and she is underpaid. They are working hard to try to find a work around with that. Courtney said another issue they have is with

cleaning and janitorial services. Currently volunteers are coming in and doing it. We have a lot of traffic through the library.

John Tholl said he can't see increasing the library anymore than the \$15,000 we have done. He doesn't want to see someone lose their home because they can't pay their property taxes. Courtney said no one is going to lose their home due to the library budget. She is willing to work with us, but she needs some help. Courtney will continue to fund raise. Non-profit fundraising group has come on-line. Moving forward it would be very much appreciated if the Board can consider any kind of situation where we can look at how retirement and health insurance can be covered for the library employee.

Budget Review

The Board reviewed the budget again, and made some cuts in capital reserve appropriations.

The Board decided to go ahead and put the parking lot on the town warrant. Will contact the Town Attorney to draft the article.

Notice of Intent to Cut Wood or Timber, Tax Map 241/Lot 003

The Board reviewed and signed the Notice of Intent to Cut Wood or Timber for Tax Map 241, Lot 003.

Notice of Intent to Cut Wood or Timber, Tax Map 209/Lot 002

The Board reviewed and signed the Supplemental Notice of Intent to Cut Wood or Timber for Tax Map 209/Lot 002.

Approve Selectmen's Meeting Minutes of January 8, 2024 & January 17, 2024 Work Session Minutes

A motion was made by Abbey Querrard to approve the Selectmen's Meeting Minutes of January 8, 2024 and the January 17, 2024 Work Session Minutes. The motion was seconded by Shawn White. All in favor, 3-0. Motion passes.

A motion was made by Shawn White to enter non-public session at 8:26 p.m. pursuant to NH RSA 91-A:3, II (a). The motion was seconded by Abbey Querrard. Roll call vote: White: Yes; Querrard: Yes; Tholl: Yes. Motion passes. The board entered non-public session at 8:26 p.m.

The Board adjourned from non-public session at 8:44 p.m.

A motion was made by Shawn White and seconded by Abbey Querrard to seal the non-public session meeting minutes because it is determined that divulgence of this information likely would affect adversely the reputation of any person other than a member of this Board. Roll call vote to seal the minutes: Tholl: Yes; Querrard: Yes; White: Yes. Motion passes, 3-0.

The meeting adjourned at 8:44 p.m.

