

Town of Vershire Selectboard Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, January 30, 2024 at 7:00pm, Vershire Town Center.
There will be a remote option for this meeting via Zoom or by phone.

Attendance: Ken Bushey-chair, Nicole White-Fogarty, Vern Stone, Gretchen Harvey-secretary, Alan Lyford, Debra Kingsbury, Mark Fogarty, Reva Seybolt, Libby Moyer, Justin Willeau, Earl Robinson, George Osgood, Carl Demrow, Kathy Hooke, Gregory Wilson, and Pat Barnes.

Call to Order: K. Bushey called the meeting to order at 7:00pm.

Agenda Review & Modifications: None

Public and Staff comments: Justin Willeau announced he is now Board President of Vershire and that he hopes to attend Selectboard meetings often to facilitate regular communication between Vershire and the Town.

Highway: Road Report: A. Lyford reported on a good meeting last week with Chris Bump from District 4, his co-worker, and with our FEMA manager to discuss the Mero Bridge project and Eastman Cross Road repairs. They will try to provide Vershire with an estimate for what it will take to get those two locations back in line with state specifications. **Mero Road RFP:** New due dates were selected and inserted into the RFP. The updated version will be reposted on the state-wide bid board and sent out to interested engineers/contractors.

Approval of Last Meeting Minutes: N. White-Fogarty moved to approve the regular meeting minutes of 1/16/24 and the Emergency Meetings Minutes of 1/18/24 and 1/27/24. V. Stone seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Current Period Warrants Approval: N. White-Fogarty moved to approve the current period warrants with a question about payroll entries for the Treasurer. V. Stone seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Town Garage: This report can now be offered on an as needed basis and fall under the Highway Report.

Carl Demrow: N. White-Fogarty thanked C. Demrow for attending the meeting and shared with him how concerned Vershire residents are due to the expectation of increased tax rates. C. Demrow offered an opening statement and shared some of the background to current conditions. In December, the VT tax commissioner estimated that on average property taxes would increase 18.5%. These increases are driven by an expected 12% increase in education spending. Some of the drivers of this increase in education spending are the cost of healthcare, inflation, the end of ESSER

funding (federal relief funding to K-12), and school infrastructure needs. Adding to these challenges is the fact that Act 127 has had the unintended consequence of increasing educational costs instead of only providing relief to school districts in poorer and more rural towns.

C. Demrow noted that a full $\frac{2}{3}$ of Vermonters pay their taxes based on their income, but that everyone on the Ways and Means Committee on which he serves is aware they need to propose solutions to these tax increases. Tomorrow morning, the committee will consider additional revenue sources that might help buffer the increase. Everything is on the table. And within the next week or two, there ought to be a proposal to deal with the unintended consequences of Act 127 and help find a path towards raising more revenue.

He answered some questions about the differences between homestead property tax rates vs. non-residential properties and certain business tax rate calculations. N. White-Fogarty noted that Vershire has a significant percentage of 2nd homeowners who pay lower taxes than year-round residents. C. Demrow admitted that this is not unlike the situation in Stowe. M. Fogarty pointed out that Vershire is nothing like Stowe in that it does not have the economic infrastructure that allows Stowe to find other means of raising revenue to offset property taxes. Moreover, second home owners in Vershire take up the very limited housing stock available thereby making it harder to attract families and full-time residents. New families with children would help improve the educational calculation.

D. Kingsbury-Lister and the town officer directly involved in the ongoing reappraisal process expressed her opinion that per pupil cost is the key to understanding rising taxes and that it is up to the voters to carefully review their local school budget process and vote accordingly. K. Hooke-chair of Rivendell Interstate School District (RISD) Board, offered some good news about the latest projections for the district: it has now been situated in the middle of the state-wide estimates of cost per pupil. She also explained that the Board is also looking at the possibility of a net-zero budget for the coming year. The final draft of the budget will be made available in the next few weeks. This good news notwithstanding, she noted that Vershire's tax rate will still rise, and she attributes the rise to an adjusted CLA (Common Level of Appraisal). In contrast, W. Fairlee and Fairlee's taxes are expected to go down. She noted also that this whole process is filled with a lot of diverging numbers and annual volatility and that these conditions make it very hard for small towns to plan.

C. Demrow acknowledged that some districts get impacted more than others. The CLA is tied to tax rates rather than to property values and this

disconnect makes it harder for voters to understand what determines their taxes overall. There are different legislative proposals being considered that would adjust how the CLA is used and how often it is recalculated. K. Hooke noted the worrisome trend of when a full-time resident homeowner's house value increases dramatically, and then the homeowner decides the higher tax bill is an incentive to sell and move elsewhere. What sometimes follows is that the house is purchased by a 2nd homeowner.

D. Kingsbury also wanted to raise the topic of how current use law and acreage impacts the town's re-appraisal effort. Although many people support conservation efforts embodied in the law, she suggested that there should be two separate tax rates for land in current use: one rate for full-time residents and another rate for non-residents.

C. Demrow agreed that the tax rate structure that favors 2nd homeowners and non-resident current use land holdings will need to be reviewed in FY 26-27 because the laws as written no longer work for Vermont. K. Hooke noted that although she supports what current use law has done to protect forested and agricultural lands, she agrees that the tax incentives need to be looked at and reconfigured to favor residents.

L. Moyer wanted to know if there is anything Vershire can do to benefit from the work being done at the Ely mine site. It was agreed that the point of contact for the EPA, Ed Hathaway, has been very willing to work with towns to mitigate any damage done to the roads as a result of the reclamation work they do at each of the mine sites.

C. Demrow appreciated knowing about Vershire's challenges. He will bring the concerns about the CLA and per pupil spending, 2nd home taxation rates, and the suggestions to adopt different rates for non-resident/residents in re: land in current use program back to Montpelier with him.

Gregory Wilson: reported that a lot has happened, since he last presented to the Selectboard. He recently received a grant (January 1st) to help fund his outreach work with families and individuals who struggle with substance abuse. His initial request to the SB was to use the TCB to host a support group every other Thursday evening, and then hold a class every 6 weeks on a Saturday. He is now requesting the use of the building every Thursday evening and once on Saturday every other month. He also has begun holding drop-in sessions at the Church-Orr house. He wanted to thank the SB for their initial support and for allowing him to use the TCB at no cost. Now that grant funding has become available, he intends to build support for the building and facilities into future grant proposals. In the interim, he has donated \$200 to the Town Center Fund via Vershare, his grant's fiscal agent.

The current grant has a time-line of 18 months and is part of a regional approach to addressing substance abuse issues facing individuals and families in rural areas.

V. Stone noted that the SB supports the work G. Wilson is doing, but that it had begun to feel out of the loop with respect to changes in programming occurring at the TCB. In the future, when programming changes or expands, the SB requests G. Wilson let the Board know of these changes (and date changes) ahead of time and before having them inserted into the Town Calendar. G. Wilson acknowledged that support for this effort coming from the Town, Vershire Fire and Rescue, and Vershire matters a lot to the success of the program. Two questions that require more discussion involve potential scheduling conflicts of events on Saturdays and the purchase of padded chairs that would require storage space in the TCB. G. Wilson will follow up on both and report back to the Selectboard at a later date.

Committee Reports:

Recreation Committee: K. Bushey reported that the ice rink has been filled but is not yet ready to open. He wanted to thank the Fire Dept. for putting in the time and effort to fill the rink.

Energy Committee: P. Barnes presented the latest Energy Committee proposal with respect to Park and Ride signage. He presented an estimate of approximately \$285 for a double-sided sign for VT 113, a sign at the entrance of the TC lot, a sign explaining the town's park and ride usage rules and hardware. He showed the Selectboard the mock up of the wording on the usage sign. P. Barnes agreed to get a 2nd estimate from M&M Graphics. The installment of the VT 113 sign requires permission from the state. All 3 signs will need breakaway posts. As per the earlier agreement with the Selectboard, the Energy Committee will cover \$250 of the costs of signage, and the Town will match those costs up to \$250. **Action:** V. Stone moved to approve the design and wording on the 3 Park'nRide signs presented by P. Barnes, which allows him to move forward with the purchases of signs, hardware, and posts. N. White-Fogarty seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

VTC Committee: R. Seybolt asked if the town has found a cleaning service for the TCB yet. She also requested permission to hire a cleaning service on a one-time basis if the search to secure regular cleaning services continues beyond the middle of February. The committee plans to hire a piano tuner to come in March using available funds in the TCB budget to tune the piano in the TCB. A bill from the calligrapher who reproduced document that accompanies the quilt has come in at \$225. This expense was approved at

an earlier Selectboard meeting and R. Seybolt can make a request for payment by the Treasurer.

Executive Session:

Action: N. White-Fogarty moved to enter an executive session due to a finding that premature general public knowledge regarding a dispute would place the public body or person involved at a substantial disadvantage 1 V.S.A. §§ 313(a)(1). K. Bushey seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Action: N. White-Fogarty moved to enter an executive session to discuss attorney-client communications regarding a dispute under the provision of 1 V.S.A .§ 313(a)(1)(F). K. Bushey seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Action: N. White-Fogarty moved to exit the executive session with a finding that the Selectboard will write the appropriate letters to respond to these complaints. V. Stone seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Action Items/Assignments:

Admin. Asst. Report: G. Harvey asked that the Selectboard sign an MOA agreed to earlier. **Action:**N. White-Fpgarty moved to approve the Selectboard chair sign an MOA with Vermont Department of Buildings and General Services (BGS) as agreed to earlier. V. Stone seconded. All in favor.

G. Harvey shared a request to the Selectboard to participate in a working group of Orange County Selectboard members for the purpose of discussing law enforcement needs and considering reforms of the relationship between OC towns and the OCSD. The group will begin meeting in March.

Adjourn: N. White-Fogarty moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:35pm. V. Stone seconded. The motion passed unanimously.