

Questions Regarding Competitive Bidding for Winter Highway Maintenance Services

Why is the Selectboard considering exploring competitive bidding for winter maintenance of the Town highways?

- The Selectboard is exploring competitive bidding in order to gather information and evaluate all reasonable options for providing winter highway maintenance services in a financially responsible and operationally sustainable manner.
- The purpose of the process is to allow the Town to compare the cost, operational capacity, and long-term implications of different service models before making future commitments.

Has the Selectboard already decided to outsource winter highway maintenance services?

- No. Issuing a Request for Proposals does not obligate the Town to outsource winter maintenance operations, eliminate positions, or award a contract. The Town may reject any or all bids if the proposals are not in the Town's best interests.

Why is the Selectboard considering this now?

- The Town recently experienced the resignation of a member of the road crew. That development highlights the operational vulnerability that can exist in a very small department where staffing changes can have an immediate and substantial impact on the Town's ability to provide services.
- The resignation provides an appropriate opportunity for the Town to evaluate its long-term operational structure and future service-delivery needs.

Is recruitment and retention becoming more difficult?

- Yes. Recruitment and retention of qualified highway employees has become increasingly difficult for many small Vermont towns, particularly given the demands of winter operations, CDL requirements, emergency response expectations, and competition from private-sector employers.

Why is this issue particularly important for a small town like Stockbridge?

- Small towns often have limited staffing depth and limited administrative capacity. A resignation, illness, injury, equipment breakdown, or staffing shortage can have a much greater operational impact in a small department than in a larger municipality.

What advantages could a contract arrangement provide?

- A contractual arrangement could provide greater budget predictability by establishing a fixed or more predictable annual cost for winter maintenance operations.
- Depending upon the structure of any agreement, a contractor may assume responsibility for some equipment maintenance, repair, and replacement costs.
- Contractors may have access to additional personnel, backup equipment, and operational resources that are difficult and expensive for small municipalities to maintain internally.

Doesn't the Town already own its equipment?

- Yes. The Town already owns its winter maintenance equipment outright, which provides flexibility. There are currently no financing or acquisition costs associated with the equipment, giving the Town flexibility to evaluate alternatives. The Town could choose to retain ownership of some or all equipment while evaluating different operational structures.
- Ownership of the equipment also means the Town is not under immediate pressure to acquire new equipment if it chooses to evaluate other service models.

How could this affect the workload of the Selectboard and Town administration?

- The Town has a three-member volunteer Selectboard. Managing municipal highway operations, employee issues, equipment maintenance, emergency response, scheduling, overtime, and operational logistics places significant demands on volunteer municipal officials.
- The Town Clerk also performs many administrative and human resources functions associated with Town employment, including payroll administration, benefits coordination, personnel recordkeeping, workers' compensation administration, regulatory compliance, and other employment-related responsibilities.
- A contractual arrangement may reduce some of the day-to-day operational and administrative responsibilities associated with managing an in-house highway department and allow Town officials and staff to focus more on oversight, budgeting, policy, and long-term planning rather than direct operational administration.

Would the Town still maintain oversight if services were contracted out?

- Yes. The Town would retain substantial oversight authority under the proposed contract, including the ability to establish operational priorities during storms and require compliance with Town directives.
- The agreement with the contractor would include significant protections for the Town, including insurance requirements, indemnification obligations, operational reporting requirements, equipment standards, performance requirements, emergency self-help authority, and the ability to withhold payment for deficient performance.

Why seek bids if the Town may decide not to outsource services?

- Obtaining bids will help the Town better understand the actual private-sector cost of providing winter highway maintenance services and will provide a useful benchmark for evaluating future budgeting and operational planning. Even if the Town ultimately decides to continue operating its own highway department, the information gathered through the bidding process may assist future decision-making.

Do Vermont towns use private contractors for highway maintenance?

- Yes. Stockbridge, like other towns, already relies on private contractors for various highway-related services, including paving, roadside mowing, bridge work, culvert replacement, and emergency repairs. Winter maintenance contracting is simply another operational model available to municipalities.
- Other small Vermont towns, including Hancock and Granville, outsource winter highway maintenance or use a hybrid approach that combines municipal employees with private contractors. This is not an unusual or experimental approach in rural municipalities.

Why is this issue particularly important for a small town like Stockbridge?

- Small towns like Stockbridge often have limited staffing depth and limited administrative capacity. A resignation, illness, injury, equipment breakdown, or staffing shortage can have a much greater operational impact in a small department than in a larger municipality.
- The Town also has a three-member volunteer Selectboard, meaning highway operations create significant demands on a small group of volunteer officials.

Why is the Town evaluating this issue while negotiating a union contract?

- The Town has just begun negotiations for its first collective bargaining agreement with road crew employees. As part of its long-term planning responsibilities, the Selectboard believes it is appropriate to evaluate the operational, financial, and administrative implications of all available service-delivery models.
- Collective bargaining agreements establish formal procedures and obligations relating to wages, hours, working conditions, and personnel administration. These agreements establish important long-term operational and financial obligations that the Town must consider as part of its planning responsibilities.
- Exploring competitive bidding now allows the Town to gather information and evaluate alternatives as part of responsible long-term operational planning.
- The Town remains committed to bargaining in good faith with its employees and to complying with all applicable labor obligations. The exploration of competitive bidding is intended to gather information and evaluate operational alternatives and should not be interpreted as a predetermined decision regarding future staffing or bargaining issues.

Could this eventually affect summer highway maintenance operations as well?

- The current Request for Proposals relates only to winter highway maintenance services. However, as part of responsible long-term planning, the Selectboard may continue evaluating how various highway services are delivered and whether different operational models could improve efficiency, service continuity, administrative manageability, or financial predictability.
- Evaluating winter maintenance services does not predetermine any future decision regarding summer highway operations, staffing, or Town-owned equipment. Any future decisions regarding additional contracting or operational changes would require separate evaluation, public discussion, and Selectboard action.