

Town of Wendell
Selectboard Meeting Minutes
March 20, 2024, 7 p.m.
Hybrid Meeting: Selectboard Offices and by Zoom

Present:

Chair Laurie DiDonato, Vice Chair Gillian Budine, Member Paul Doud

Also Present: Glenn Johnson-Mussad, Town Coordinator; Cynthia Bolling, Selectboard Clerk; Carolyn Manley, Treasurer; Nina Keller, Court Dorsey, Anna Gyorgy, Bill Stubblefield, Gloria Kegeles, NAB group; FinCom Co-Chair Meagan Sylvia; members of the public and press.

I. Roll Call/Call to Order

With all members present, the meeting was called to order at 7:04 p.m.

II. Announcements

There were no announcements.

III. Public Comment

There were no public comments.

IV. Selectboard Updates and Comments

Chair Laurie DiDonato asked the Selectboard members to review the annual report she sent and send in any edits they might have.

V. Selectboard Meeting and Warrant Schedule Review

The meeting and warrant schedules won't align for a while.

VI. Town Coordinator Report. Glenn Johnson-Mussad

Arrival of New Chairs

Glenn thanked Vice Chair Gillian Budine and Member Paul Doud for their help with getting and installing the chairs.

Contaminated Water Supply Grant

- There is a state grant program, Emerging Contaminants in Small and Disadvantaged Communities, that might help reimburse the Town for some of the money it had to spend remediating the PFAS water contamination problem at the Swift River Elementary School.
- The reimbursements may go back to July 1, 2023, or Oct. 1, 2023.
 - a. Glenn is working with Treasurer Carolyn Manley to prepare a list of the Town's expenses for those periods.

Money Managers Meeting

Glenn expressed his appreciation for the flexibility people showed in moving the date from the fourth Wednesday in April to Tuesday, April 23.

Accounting Course

Glenn started the Greenfield Community College-run Fundamentals of Municipal Accounting course this week.

Noncitizen Voting

Material has been submitted to the offices of state Senator Joanne Comerford and state Representative Aaron Saunders regarding Wendell's request for legislation allowing noncitizens to vote in Town meetings and elections and to serve on elected boards and committees.

VII. Consent Agenda

- A Approve Selectboard meeting minutes of March 6, 2024
- B. Declaration of chairs and dolly as surplus

Laurie made a motion to approve the consent agenda. Gillian seconded. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

Town Coordinator Glenn Johnson-Mussad observed that this note about the 28 chairs and dolly that will be declared as surplus will constitute sufficient documentation for Carolyn.

VIII. Building Inspector. Glenn

The Selectboard interviewed Justin Gale for the position of building inspector at its last meeting.

- At this meeting, Glenn provided a comparison of building inspector expenses, showing what Wendell would pay an individual vs. what the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) charges for the same service, which includes plumbing and electrical inspections.
- Glenn has obtained positive, informal references for Justin but hasn't asked for formal references yet.

Discussion

- Wendell has its own (appointed) electrical and plumbing inspectors.
- There are no issues with the electrical inspector, but Carolyn noted, as she has previously, that Wendell's plumbing inspector hasn't turned over any fees to the town in close to two years.
 - a. Both inspectors get paid 100% of each permit fee, minus \$10, which goes to the Town.
- The building inspector is paid a salary (\$10,933), however, and the inspection fees go to the Town.
- Wendell has collected about \$9,300 this year in building inspection fees.
- When comparing what Wendell spends on the building inspector's salary to what it gets for building inspection fees, Gillian noted that the net cost to Wendell wasn't very much.

Laurie made a motion to hire Justin Gale for the building inspector position, pending the receipt of positive references, with the understanding that he will complete the necessary certifications prior to the end of fiscal year (FY) 25. Gillian seconded. No discussion.

The motion passed unanimously.

Paul intends to have a conversation with the plumbing inspector about the issues discussed.

IX. Nexamp Partnership. Laurie

Laurie wanted to know how interested the board might be in entering into a power purchase agreement (PPA) with Nexamp, a solar company.

- The clean energy developer proposes to site a large solar battery in a municipal building in Wendell, which would in turn be tied into backup solar batteries placed in people's homes, at no cost to the residents.
 - a. Nexamp would own the batteries and the homeowner would rent them from the company.

- b. The company would lease the space for the larger solar battery storage installation in a Town building and charge customers for the power it provides.
- c. In a memo included in the meeting's document packet, Nexamp said the PPA with Wendell would be written so that its residential customers as well as the Town could save money on their regular electricity bills.

Discussion

- Gillian remarked that the quality of the company is important, and Laurie agreed that the procurement process would be something to keep in mind, to make sure the town is getting the best deal.
- Laurie will bring the proposal to the Energy Committee tomorrow.
- Possible municipal sites for the battery: the Highway Garage, the Town Office (but the roof would need to be replaced), the fire station, or the Swift River School (which would have to involve New Salem).
- Nina Keller from the No Assault and Batteries in Wendell (NAB) citizens' group suggested researching the answer to these questions: Who is this company? What other investments is it making? What kind of batteries would be placed in homes?
- Court Dorsey from the NAB noted that the agreement is creative and would demonstrate that the Town is not against solar; it's just looking for a sane way to do it.
- Bill Stubblefield from NAB said Nexamp is a very large developer and asked that the proposal be closely examined.
 - a. According to Bill, the distributed energy system they're proposing, which gives the power company the ability to tap into a homeowners' individual energy storage system during hours of high demand, is an improvement over concentrated energy storage solutions, but the system should be under public control.
- Gillian noted that National Grid has a zero-interest loan program where homeowners can purchase their own energy storage system (which can run about \$20,000). National Grid would hook it up to the grid, but the homeowner would control when that would happen.

X. Battery Storage

Bylaw Proposal. Laurie

Previously, the Selectboard decided not to hold a Special Town Meeting until it could present a bylaw that would have a better chance of passing muster with the Massachusetts attorney general (AG) than the bylaw the NAB drew up.

- Town Counsel Doneski, who reviewed NAB's bylaw and recommended changes, was working on the changes he thought would make it acceptable to the AG but didn't have it ready in time for tonight's meeting.
- Laurie intends to contact Attorney Doneski tomorrow about when he might be finished.

Discussion

- The members of the NAB who were present talked about whether they'd want to wait for Attorney Doneski to submit his changes to the board (which involves eliminating the land use restrictions in the NAB's version), move forward with a citizens' petition to have a Special Town Meeting (STM) and present the NAB's original bylaw, or present both at an STM.
- Gillian noted that Sen. Comerford encouraged the NAB to move forward with a petition that's signed by Wendell's citizens.
 - a. The NAB could present the petition along with its original bylaw (with a synopsis of the content to make it readable) or just present a petition they're almost finished working on, which contains a general message instead of the bylaw.

Fail-Safe Review Request. Glenn

At Glenn's request, Sen. Comerford and Rep. Saunders forwarded Wendell the fail-safe review letter they wrote earlier to Director Tori Kim at the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) Office.

- The letter asked for a review of Borrego/New Leaf Energy's proposal to build a lithium-ion battery storage facility in Wendell, but it was declined for technical reasons.
- Sen. Comerford and Rep. Saunders suggested Wendell submit another fail-safe review request on its own behalf.
- Such a letter would give Wendell the opportunity to hold an event to gather signatures; a minimum of 10 is required.

Discussion

- Glenn will work on a fail-safe draft and send it to Bill for review.
- Laurie would like to see the letter go out in a week, with NAB helping to get signatures—hopefully a lot more than the minimum 10.
- The NAB website, nabunited.org, gives information about what the group is doing.
- There's a meeting about siting large projects with a focus on Wendell that will be held at the Millers River Environmental Center in Athol from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. on March 27. It's organized by North Quabbin Energy.

Request for Assistance in DPU Docket. Glenn

- The Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities request is for small towns that find it's an unfair burden to cover the legal expenses involved in fighting large-scale utility siting projects like New Leaf's.
- This letter, which Glenn will draft, should go as a packet with the fail-safe review request letter, at the suggestion of Sen. Comerford and Rep. Saunders.

XI. Town Meetings

Special Town Meeting

- The board tentatively scheduled a Special Town Meeting for May 1 at 6 p.m., the same night as the Selectboard meeting.

Annual Town Meeting

The ATM was scheduled for June 8 at a previous meeting.

XII. Items Not Anticipated

FinCom Salary Recommendations. Meagan Sylvia, Finance Committee Co-Chair

- The FinCom recommends purchasing the Zobrio accounting software without the cash management module. Price: \$41,874, for FY 25.
- It approves Carolyn's salary package recommendation of \$26,808 for Town Accountant Erin Degnan and a salary of \$31,350 for the fire chief.
- The FinCom is deferring a decision on the salary proposal Glenn and Carolyn made to split the role of the finance coordinator until the Selectboard takes a look at it.

Discussion

Meagan will add the following request from the members of the Public Safety Committee to the FinCom's next meeting:

- a. Add an extra \$2,500 to the fire chief's salary so there's some overlap between the outgoing chief and the new one.

Note: The following item about planting trees was actually discussed just prior to the meeting's end.

Tree Planting Proposal. Laurie

National Grid is offering Wendell \$2,500 to plant trees on Town land in mid-April, for Earth Day.

- Tree Warden Cliff Dornbusch has asked the board to let him know what the planting logistics would be.
- He would also like to plant some trees on the Common and his deadline is in a week.

Discussion

- Where would the trees go? How many are there and what kind are they?
- If the planting involves Fisk Pond, the request will have to go through the Conservation Commission (Con Com).
- The Selectboard can't act on a tree planting proposal unless it includes specific information about the number and kinds of trees, a layout of where they would go, and prior clearance from the Con Com if needed.

Laurie will notify Cliff that the Selectboard lacks the information it would need to make a decision on his proposal before his deadline comes up and will encourage him to include the specific information discussed in future proposals.

XIII. Prioritization of Potential Projects. Glenn

Massachusetts Director of Rural Affairs Ann Gobi wants a list from Wendell of the top three projects that it would like funding for.

- Glenn got the following list of priorities from Carolyn, Fire Chief Joe Cuneo and Project Coordinator Phil Delorey and asked the Selectboard for their feedback:
 1. Fire department equipment.
 2. Software—assessors/accountant.
 3. Facility upkeep—anything, roofs, painting, structural repairs, etc.
 4. Dangerous intersection redesign.

Discussion

- The fire department badly needs a truck.
- The Swift River School is looking at some large upcoming expenses, including interior doors and the phone system.
- The Selectboard agreed to submit items 1 through 3 as the top three priorities.

Glenn will find out if the list he submits should include details like specific equipment and costs.

XIV. Town Coordinator Schedule. Glenn

Glenn proposed rearranging his current 28-hour schedule, which has him working 8 hours a day from Monday through Wednesday and half a day Friday. The changes (retaining the same total hours) would allow him to attend Selectboard meetings in person and to take on non-Wendell projects.

Proposed Schedule

Mondays 3-5 p.m.

1st and 3rd Wednesdays, 4-6 p.m.

Zoom: 2, 4, 5th Wednesday, 4-5 p.m.

Office: Three days a week, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Discussion

- Gillian felt that fixed hours on perhaps Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays—with the understanding that they might change at times—would be easier for everyone to keep track of.
- Everyone liked the later hours on the first and third Wednesdays, so Glenn could attend meetings in person.
 - a. However, he has a conflict with Greenfield school committee meetings at 6 p.m., so he couldn't do office hours from, for example, from 1 to 9 p.m. every Wednesday in the month.
- Tentative schedule: six fixed hours a day on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Flex hours throughout the week, including Tuesdays and Thursdays, plus designated office hours.

Glenn agreed to come back with a pilot schedule that he thinks might work for everyone.

XV. FY25 Salary Proposal. Glenn

Glenn presented a spreadsheet of town administrator/coordinator annual salaries prepared by the FRCOG for FY 24.

- Out of the 22 towns listed, the highest salary was \$124,233 for Montague's administrator, who works 40 hours per week (\$60 an hour)
- The lowest salary was for Wendell's town coordinator: \$36,520 for a 28-hour week (\$25 an hour).
- New Salem's town coordinator, who works 24 hours a week, came in at number 17 with a salary of \$42,268 (\$34 an hour).
- Taking an average of the hourly wages of town coordinators working from 29 to 37 hours a week, Glenn obtained an average of \$34 an hour, for a proposed town coordinator's salary of \$51,731.68 for FY 25.

Discussion

- Laurie noted that there are other variables, such payments for people who assist the town coordinator and Glenn's vacation package, which is larger than normal.
- A large increase might affect salary expectations in comparable town positions.
- To eliminate a sudden, large salary increase, a plan could be made for step increases over several years.

Next Steps

- Carolyn will work up a 10-year history of salaries for leadership positions at the library, highway, and fire department, as well as for the town coordinator.
- At their next meeting, the FinCom will be asked how it might consider increasing the town coordinator's salary to bring it more in line with rates in surrounding towns.

XVI. Adjournment

Gillian moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:14 p.m. Paul seconded. No discussion.

The motion passed unanimously.

Documents

Selectboard Meeting Minutes, March 6, 2024

Selectboard Posting and Agenda, March 20, 2024

Dry Hydrant Survey, McAvoy Pond, March 6, 2024

Email re Nexamp Partnership with Wendell Energy Committee, March 9, 2024

KP #908047-V1-Wendell Dry Hydrant Easement, Lockes Village Rd. and McAvoy Pond, March 6, 2024

Wendell Energy Storage MEPA Review Letter, September 13, 2023

Inspection Options, March 20, 2024

Coordinator Proposed Schedule, March 20, 2024

Coordinator Salary Analysis, Feb. 14, 2024