

Town of Wendell
Selectboard Meeting Minutes
May 15, 2024, 7:00 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, Recording Secretary; Meagan Sylvia, Al Macintyre, Finance Committee, Carolyn Manley, Treasurer; Amy Simmons, Board of Health; Tech One representatives Justin Hughes and Lee Gutkopf; Library Director Miriam Warner, members of the public and press.

I. Roll Call/Call to Order

With all members present, the meeting was called to order at 7:01 p.m.

II. Announcements

There were no Selectboard announcements.

III. Public Comment

There were no public comments.

IV. Selectboard Updates and Comments

There were no Selectboard updates or comments.

V. Selectboard Meeting and Warrant Schedule Review

The Selectboard reviewed the schedule as printed in the May 15 meeting agenda.

- It was noted that the June 6 Annual Town Meeting wasn't included on the printed schedule.
- The Selectboard might have to meet on May 29 to approve the Annual Town Meeting warrant.

VI. Project Coordinator Report. Phil Delorey

Wendell Recycling and Transfer Station (WRATS) Landfill Capping

- Phil now has one estimate for the final cost of capping: \$212,000.
- The project doesn't meet the criteria for funding by the state's Community One Stop for Growth (One Stop) program, so at a later date a funding source will have to be considered.
- A state inspector is pleased with what's been done on the site and has approved the open-top boxes.

Town Hall Painting and Handicap Access

- A request for painting has been made, but it's not likely to happen before June 30; it will go on Phil's to-do list for the next fiscal year.
- Rear handicap access to the Town Hall might be funded with housing rehab money.
 - a. However, according to Franklin County Regional Housing & Redevelopment Authority Director of Community Development Brian McHugh, those funds would only be available after some ongoing housing rehab projects are completed and the money comes back to the Town.

Grant for Erving-Wendell Bridge Repair

- The project is eligible to be funded through One Stop, under its Mass Works Infrastructure program, using \$125,000 from its Rural Development Fund.

- Glenn Johnson-Mussad is working on accessing the full electronic application as the Town’s official grant administrator.
 - a. Glenn can designate Phil as an authorized user, and then Phil can fill out the form. They have about three weeks to do submit the grant application.

Proposed Wood Bank Site at the WRATS

- Based on the survey for the abutting property that Alf Berry did a few years ago, the site looks good.
 - a. There are a couple of acres there that are relatively flat.
 - b. However, no funds are available to get in an excavator, remove the trees and the stumps on it, and put in a roadway to make it accessible. Estimated cost: \$35,000.
 - c. Phil noted that the value of the trees could cover the cost of removing them.

Discussion

Since the current wood bank on Montague Road hasn’t seen much activity this winter, and Tree Warden Cliff Dornbusch hasn’t been available to discuss the new site with Phil, the Selectboard decided not to pursue it.

VII. Approve Minutes of May 1, 2024

Gillian moved to approve the May 1, 2024, Selectboard meeting minutes. Paul Doud seconded. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

VIII. Board of Health. Amy Simmons, Chair, Board of Health

The Board of Health (BOH) would like the Selectboard’s permission to forward a regulation they wrote regarding the proposed Borrego/New Leaf Energy battery energy storage system in Wendell to Town Counsel David Doneski for his review and feedback.

- The regulation, which they approved on May 13, was prepared in consultation with health agent Glen Ayers, who helped the BOH develop conservation-oriented housing bylaws that the state let pass in 2014.
- Their goal is to present a regulation that passes muster with Attorney Doneski and hopefully with the state.
- The BOH regulation only addresses public safety.
- They are prepared to make whatever revisions Attorney Doneski recommends and then hold a public hearing.

Discussion

- In writing the regulation, lead authors Barbara Craddock and James Frank consulted different state regulations for battery and energy storage as well as those from other towns.
- Amy noted that the Town should recognize that the proposed facility sits above a potential public water supply and should be designated as a protected groundwater site.
- Laurie DiDonato recommended that the BOH review the comments and changes Attorney Doneski made to the bylaw written by the No Assault and Batteries in Wendell citizens’ group.
- Amy agreed to review that version of the bylaw with the BOH at its next meeting.

Gillian moved to approve the legal services requested by the Board of Health after the BOH reviews the bylaw that Attorney Doneski edited, compares it with what they have written and makes any changes deemed necessary. Paul seconded. No discussion.

The motion passed unanimously.

IX. Old Home Day Fiscal Agent. Amy Simmons, Old Home Day organizing group

The Old Home Day group, which has been collecting donations for the event for the past few years, would like to do something different this year: apply for a \$2,500 Festivals & Projects grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

- However, the sponsor either needs to have nonprofit status or act as a fiscal agent for the group applying for the grant, so they're asking Wendell to act as fiscal agent for the application.
- The money would be used to pay for the day's expenses, including children's activities and musicians.

Discussion

- The Selectboard discussed three challenges to having the Town act as a fiscal agent:
 - a. As a public municipality, there may be some laws that prevent the Town might from sponsoring this kind of private event.
 - b. This is a busy time of year, and the timeline is short.
 - c. The amount of paperwork involved would be considerable, including setting up a separate account, getting W9s from each of the vendors involved and issuing separate checks.

It was suggested that the group reach out to organizations that might be better suited to sponsoring the grant, including Good Neighbors or the Friends of Wendell, or perhaps a regional arts nonprofit or even the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

X. Municipal Light Plant (MLP). Laurie

A. Cost-Sharing Agreement with New Salem. Laurie

Wendell and New Salem are planning work to make the internet networks they use more reliable and robust.

- New Salem has done most of the work getting a grant, which will pay for a good part of the project.
- The cost-sharing agreement in the meeting documents folder spells out how the grant would be split up between each town.
 - a. It has been reviewed and approved by Attorney Doneski and the MLPs in New Salem and Wendell.

Discussion

While all the costs go through the MLP, the Selectboard's agreement is needed because the MLP is the Town's property.

Gillian made a motion to approve the cost-sharing agreement with New Salem, referred to as the "Backhaul Service and Cost Sharing Agreement." Paul seconded. No discussion.

The motion passed unanimously.

B. Move to an Elected Board. Laurie

MLP board member and Website Committee Chair Robert Heller has been wanting the MLP to become an elected board rather than an appointed board for some time.

- He brought the matter before MLP manager Ray DiDonato and the board again this year and they have agreed to the move.
 - a. If the issue appears on a warrant and passes at a Town meeting, the existing board won't be dissolved until May 2025.
 - b. New members will be elected for staggered terms of one, two, and three years.

Discussion

- The MLP manager's position wouldn't change.

- If a position is vacant, the Selectboard can appoint someone.

Gillian made a motion to approve the proposed article from the MLP to move from an appointed board to an elected board. Paul seconded. No discussion.

The motion passed unanimously.

The Selectboard agreed that its approval of the article is confined to its appearance on the warrant and is not a recommendation for or against the proposal itself.

XI. Gate Lane. Treasurer Carolyn Manley

Efforts to have the Massachusetts Audubon Society buy the vacant building and property (with input from a state agency) on Gate Lane, demolish it, and restore it as conservation land have stalled.

- The cost of insuring it is building up.
- The sticking point seems to be a Land Court decision, which Audubon’s attorney hasn’t responded to.
- Options for moving forward:
 - a. Write a Request for Proposal (RFP) and give the property to the Town’s Conservation Commission.
 - b. If the property is sold as is, an RFP needs to be written that asks the buyer to commit to rehabbing or demolishing the building on the property (estimated demo cost: \$15,000).
 - c. If the Town demos the building before auctioning off the property, its starting bid would have to be much higher so it could recoup the demo cost.

Discussion

Because this time of year is so busy for all parties involved, Glenn hasn’t been able to arrange a meeting and won’t be able to do so until after July 1.

Next Steps

- Glenn will let all parties know the Town is looking to settle this by a certain date.
- He will also consult with Open Space Committee Chair Dan Leahy to see what his second-best option might be.

XII. Interview with Tech One about Tech Services. Glenn

Glenn has asked Tech One for a quote to reconfigure the Ethernet wiring in the Town Offices so there’s a more direct route into the building, which should cut down on service interruptions.

- Entre Technologies Services
 - a. The Town currently has a month-to-month contract with IT management and development company Entre Technologies, which includes managing Wendell’s account with Microsoft.
 - b. Wendell’s experience with Entre is mixed: some services have been good, and some not so good.
 - c. They originally claimed they had a two-hour response window, but that hasn’t been adhered to.
- Tech One Services
 - a. The company can provide most of the same services, but not the Microsoft management part at present.
 - b. Its pricing model involves buying a block of hours and their prices seem to be lower than Entre’s.
 - c. The company is local, so their response time should be much better than Entre’s.
 - d. They have a specialized electrician who can review the Ethernet wiring problem and give a quote.

Q&A with Tech One representatives Justin Hughes and Lee Gutkopf

- Tech One has been in business since 2001, works with municipalities, and is local.
- The company can fix the Ethernet wiring problem in the Town Offices with no problem.
- Tech One operates a little differently from Entre: They make sure the client always has full administrative access and remains responsible for credentials and passwords.
 - a. This makes it easier for the client to change companies, since those keys are kept in the client's own database.
- They can manage the Microsoft account, but it's a process that sometimes can take months, so they'd need to talk to their Microsoft advisor before saying more.
- Tech One can save Wendell a lot of money, their availability will be higher, and they can be called on even if there's no service agreement.

Comment from Library Director Miriam Warner

- Miriam liked Tech One's proposals to boost the Wi-Fi in the library and resolve some of the issues they have been having with their firewall. Tech One took time to explain, demonstrate where things were, and identify who to call.
- Another ongoing problem Entre hasn't resolved: People still can't connect to one of the library printers.

Next Steps

The Selectboard will wait for a quote from Tech One and will make a decision at its next meeting.

XIII. Alternate Building Inspector. Glenn

After the assistant building inspector retired, the Selectboard asked Glenn to explore other models for the position.

- The former assistant building inspector was paid a fixed yearly stipend (\$400).
 - a. After getting feedback from several towns, Glenn recommended making the following changes:
Change the title to alternate building inspector (ABI) and pay the ABI on a per-inspection basis.
 - b. Montague pays its alternate building inspector \$45 per inspection.

Discussion

- The Selectboard was in favor of making the changes Glenn recommended.
- Carolyn noted that the title can be changed in the budget before the Town Meeting. She will work out the details with Town Accountant Erin Degnan.

Glenn will write up a job description for the position and have it ready for the next meeting.

XIV. Hiring of Accountant and Accounting Assistant. Glenn

Now that the Selectboard has asked Erin and her assistant Emilee to work for the Town of Wendell directly instead of working under the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) accounting services program, the Selectboard needs to approve them for the jobs they applied for.

Gillian moved to hire Erin Degnan for the accountant position and Emilee Rybczyk for the accounting assistant position for the Town of Wendell. Paul seconded.

Discussion

Amend the motion by adding "effective July 1, 2024" to the phrase, "position for the Town of Wendell,"

The amended motion passed unanimously.

XV. FY 25 Fuel Bids. Glenn

The fiscal year (FY) 25 fuel bids have been posted to the FRCOG website and towns must email FRCOG to lock in their prices by 4 p.m. on May 22.

- Since the deadline will come up before the board meets again, Glenn asked the Selectboard to designate someone to put in Wendell's bid.
- Glenn said the FRCOG works hard to get the best prices for towns through its shared-procurement program, so he would choose the fixed price FRCOG recommends.
- The fixed price will hopefully save money, but due to the volatility of the energy market, there's no guarantee.

Discussion

While Towns can also choose a variable rate, those who want to lock in a fixed price must take 100% of their gallons.

Gillian made a motion to give Glenn permission to select a contract on behalf of the Town of Wendell by the May 22 deadline. Paul seconded. No discussion.

The motion passed unanimously.

XVI. Town Hall Rentals and Accounts. Laurie

A proposal to have Kitchen Coordinator Sarah Wilson administer Town Hall and as well as kitchen rentals has been approved by the Kitchen Committee as well as Glenn (who has been administering Town Hall rentals).

- The Selectboard needs to approve the change and work out the details of combining the Town Hall and Kitchen accounts.
- Sarah is currently paid \$20 an hour out of a revolving Kitchen account.

Discussion

- Carolyn recommends writing an article for the Annual Town Meeting that changes the name of the Kitchen revolving fund and states exactly what it is paying for (revenue, expenses, administrative duties).
 - a. Doing so would expand what the fund covers to include rentals and expenses for the Town Hall as well as the kitchen.
 - b. Currently, Town Hall rentals come out of the Town Hall expense account and the revenue goes into the General Fund.
 - c. Suggestions: Change the name of the Kitchen Fund to the Town Hall Fund and allow the revenue from Town Hall rentals to go into the new, combined Town Hall revolving fund. Then Sarah could be paid from that account.
- Glenn will gather data on how much money the Town has been making from rentals.
 - a. At a later date, the board should refresh the fee structure for chair and table rentals as needed.
- An effort should be made to promote the revenue-generating surplus equipment auction that takes place in the fall.

Carolyn will work with Glenn to write up a description of the new Town Hall revolving fund.

XVII. Items Not Anticipated

Levy Limit. Meagan Sylvia and Al Macintyre, Finance Committee Co-Chairs (FinCom)

- According to Massachusetts law (Proposition 2 1/2), the levy (the money Wendell raises through real and personal property taxes) has a limit. The FY 25 budget passes that limit.
- FinCom is asking for permission to submit a \$200,000 override at the Annual Town Meeting so that the \$460,000 originally allocated from the Stabilization Fund to offset the tax rate is reduced to \$260,000.

- The Stabilization Fund is dwindling at an alarming rate, which is putting the Town at risk; some emergency issue might pop up that couldn't be addressed.
 - a. Ideally, the Stabilization Fund should have close to \$1 million in it.
- Meagan suggested that Massachusetts Director of Rural Affairs Anne Gobi might have helpful advice.
- A major cause of the shortfall: Revenue simply has not kept pace with expenses and inflation.

Discussion

- According to Carolyn's preliminary research, the FinCom would have to submit the original budget, then separately specify which items (totaling \$200,000) would require an override.
 - a. If the override doesn't pass, the items specified would be cut.
- The override items include both schools and the police.
 - a. The Swift River Elementary School is coming in with a 16% increase.
 - b. The Ralph C. Mahar Regional School District is coming in with an 18% increase, due to increased enrollment.
 - c. After negotiations, the police increase is at 40%.
- Gillian observed that 49 accounts haven't paid taxes in FY 24; last year 27 accounts didn't pay.
 - a. Outstanding taxes in 2023 total \$650,000.
- Those present weren't sure whether debt-excluded items were included in the levy limit calculation.

Next Steps

- Carolyn will put together a document about the items (the Town Office Building for sure) that are debt excluded and send it to Meagan.
- The FinCom will use this information to tweak the budget as needed when they meet next Monday, May 20.
- They will also put together more information on general trends in revenues and expenses to help people better understand the budget presented.
- An Economic Development Committee to improve Wendell's ability to generate income should be formed.

Election of Selectboard Officers

This item is traditionally first on the agenda.

Gillian made a motion to nominate Laurie DiDonato as chair. Paul seconded. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

Laurie made a motion to nominate Gillian Budine as vice chair. Paul seconded. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

Selectboard Meeting on May 29

- The Selectboard penciled in a short virtual-only meeting for May 29.

Finance Director Position Proposal. Glenn

Does the Selectboard want to appoint Carolyn and Glenn as co-directors to fill the vacant Finance Director position?

- Carolyn and Glenn have sent the FinCom a description of how they would split those duties and the version in the meeting documents folder incorporates the FinCom's changes.

Discussion

- Carolyn makes sure that she runs all budgetary items by the FinCom; she will be the lead contact.

- The job description expands the position somewhat to ensure there's better communication with departments and the co-directors are more involved with capital projects.

Gillian moved to approve the proposal that the finance director position be shared by Glenn Johnson-Mussad and Carolyn Manley as of July 1, 2023, to continue through June 30, 2025. Paul seconded. No discussion. The motion passed unanimously.

Restored Memorial Display. Glenn

The WWII Memorial display that Jim Gillio offered to have restored and donated to Wendell has shipped and will arrive Friday.

Discussion

- Paul volunteered to be available to receive it.
- Glenn will prepare thank-you notes to Jim, the restorer, and the hospital that donated the shipping charges.
- Once it arrives, the Selectboard will decide where to put it.
- The Selectboard will share its arrival at the Town Meeting and let everyone know where it will be placed.

Selectboard Meeting Lands on Juneteenth. Glenn

- The board rescheduled its June 19 meeting to Tuesday, June 18.
- Glenn will find out if Erin intends to prepare warrants to be signed on June 19 as scheduled.

Fire Chief Insurance Coverage

In accordance with its fire services agreement with New Salem, Wendell and New Salem should split the cost of fire and accident insurance for Fire Chief Joe Cuneo, but it's been hard to determine what that number should be.

- The insurance coverage isn't split out by individual.
- When Glenn asked the insurance company for a number, a rep called Glenn and New Salem Town Coordinator Kathy Neal to say that each town should pay for full-time insurance coverage for Chief Cuneo.
- Glenn suggested writing a letter to the insurance company that emphasizes Chief Cuneo's part-time status as well as the sharing agreement.
- New Salem Selectboard Chair Susan Cloutier agrees that such a letter should be written and signed by both boards, and it should say the state is encouraging towns to enter into these sharing agreements.

Discussion

It was suggested that Glenn write the letter, have both Selectboards sign, and ask for a reply in writing that justifies the insurance company's request for the increased coverage. A copy of the Wendell-New Salem sharing agreement for fire services should be attached.

XVIII.

Old Business Follow-Up

Glenn prepared a document outlining all of the different projects that have loose ends. He'll email a link to the board, and they will put it on the agenda for the first meeting in June.

XIX. Adjournment

Laurie made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 9:52 p.m. No discussion.

The motion passed unanimously.

Documents

Alternate Building Inspector Proposal, April 26, 2024

Selectboard Meeting Minutes, May 1, 2024
Selectboard Posting and Agenda, May 15, 2024
Fuel bids Process Email, May 2, 2024
FinCom Email about Levy Limit Override, May 14, 2024
Finance Director Position, May 13, 2024
FY2025_v1, May 14, 2024
KP-#915348-v3-WNDL, Network Backhaul sharing Agreement, May 13, 2024
Levy Limit Wendell 2025