

Selectboard Special Meeting Minutes

Friday, January 18, 2019 at 7pm at the Calais Town Offices

Present: Denise Wheeler (Chair), John Brabant (Vice Chair), Rose Pelchuck (Member), Sharon Winn Fannon (Member), Clif Emmons (Member), Katie Lane-Karnas (Recording Secretary), Judy Robert (Town Clerk), Greg Pelchuck

1. Call to Order: Denise Wheeler called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm.
2. Public Comment: None.
3. Review, Additions/Changes to Agenda: Greg Pelchuck attended to contribute his professional input after he learned that a draft Article pertaining to the purchase of a tractor for roadside mowing had been removed from the Warning. The Chair stated that the Warning approval and vote had been completed for this year; changing the Warning would entail warning and holding another meeting. Greg Pelchuck provided detailed research comparing the new tractor purchased by East Montpelier (purchase price \$113,000-\$130,000) with his son's experience with the same tractor, purchased used, and an identical tractor and mower system for sale secondhand in Pennsylvania; he also researched estimates for a Fairfield company to assemble the used tractor/mower, and Bellavance's hauling rate from Pennsylvania. The total cost to the town would come in under \$60,000. Calais currently budgets \$10,000 (\$10,400 FY20 proposed) per year to hire a person to mow roadsides. The Board was interested in the information for next year's budget; the Warning had been approved and voted on for this year. The Board suggested that Greg Pelchuck could bring it up on the floor at Town Meeting.
4. FY 2020 budget discussion and revisions: Denise Wheeler reminded the group that the budget vote on 1/14/2019 included a contingency for "the Chair and Clif Emmons bringing the edited budget to the staff meeting on Wednesday; if new information arises or this is problematic, the Board may revisit their budget." As indicated, she and Clif Emmons had met with town office staff, and reported that it was a difficult conversation. The Chair read a detailed statement that included her regret for the late nature of the salary discussion; recognition of major configuration changes that have been required over the last year as staff members and the Board stayed in close communication to learn what actual hours were required to fulfill duties; and the amount of time she and Clif Emmons have spent meeting with office staff in an effort to improve communication, morale and trust. She hoped for a future discussion on how to improve the budget process to avoid this situation.

John Brabant moved to adopt the budget proposed for FY20 as proposed before the changes made at the 1/14/2019 meeting (the effect to be: to re-vest the \$4,000 to the Delinquent Tax Collector position and to make the Delinquent Tax Collector position a separate line item and separate position from the Town Treasurer). Clif Emmons seconded.

Lengthy and passionate discussion ensued.

Sharon Winn Fannon discussed the spreadsheet she presented at the 1/14/2019 meeting, and noted that meeting was the first opportunity for the Board to look at reducing proposed salary that had been discussed as “wish list.” She explained calculations of percentage increases for office staff salaries. Since the 1/14/19 meeting, the Board learned that the Delinquent Tax Collector is currently handling seventy-seven delinquent taxpayers.

The Chair noted that this was not the first opportunity for the Board to look at reducing line items. The Board has been working on the budget since last fall at almost every meeting and reviewing the budget line by line on many occasions giving Board members ample opportunity to comment or provide additional information. The budget process this year is the same as it has been over the past several years. Any Board member at any meeting could have weighed in and requested changes, additions or further information as needed. That said, going forward we can amend the process and the Chair offered to meet with Sharon to reflect on a different process for the upcoming year.

The Town Clerk joined the discussion, referencing the recent evolution of staffing and compensation. In 2016, when it was decided to create a town charter, staffing levels were recognized by the Board as unsustainable as they existed. She shared the details of configuration changes between 2016-2018 in a spreadsheet that indicated the positions in the office over that time, the total number of staff hours worked per week (less in proposed FY20 than the previous two years), and the totals for FY2018, 2019 and proposed FY20 staff salary (less in proposed FY20 than in the previous two years). She stated that she was here to answer questions and stated her concern over the Assistant Town Clerk’s reduction in proposed salary. She pointed out that the Town Treasurer is doing tasks such as licking and stuffing envelopes, that should be done by an assistant. It would add security for the Town to have a person who has knowledge of treasurer work in the case of the treasurer going on vacation, taking sick leave or quitting.

Sharon Winn Fannon articulated her discomfort over the disparate range of increases from 2.7% for some employees to a much higher percentage increase for others; for example, the proposed hourly increase for the Assistant Town Clerk position is from \$20 to 22 an hour, a 10% increase. The discussion became heated regarding selection of and use of the CPI number. Rose Pelchuck commented on the need for the Board to be thinking about these issues as the employer and the difficulty in defending a percentage increase as much as this for a clerical position. John Brabant commented that the idea was to compensate the person for what she brought to the position, in regard to the extensive resume and skillset she brings to the table, the excellent fit within the office, and requiring significantly less intervention from the Selectboard. Board members discussed and disagreed about their comfort level with defending this to taxpayers. The Board considered the position they were in at the time of hiring the current Assistant Town Clerk. They discussed how the budget process went over the last few months, and whether there was an opportunity for budget reductions. John Brabant pointed out that Denise Wheeler and Clif Emmons were the Board members who were charged with yearlong continuing communication with the office staff on behalf of the whole Board, and have provided information that was always aligned with what the Board learned from the staff themselves; he assessed that office staff performance has been a really good investment and it is too late in the year to question the process the Board engaged in (in terms of the Chair and Clif Emmons serving to relay information on staff needs and work hours).

Rose Pelchuck added that fairness, equitability and accountability to taxpayers is needed, including between departments. She reiterated her appreciation and respect for Town office staff, and that the remarkable quality of work they contribute could never be really fully compensated by the Town.

Clif Emmons reminded the group that everyone on the Board voted in favor of the motion put forth at the 1/14/19 meeting; he reported that after that meeting a nagging discomfort caused him to reflect that the Board had considered CPI and merit increases, but neglected to engage in discussion around documented increase in responsibilities and market adjustments for the Town office staff (as has been done for the Road Crew). He considered that if the Road Crew have an established baseline for salary, the office staff should have the same, which would allow conversations around fairness and equitability. He shared an anecdote from his personal work history that spoke to the Board's similar endeavor to fairly and transparently manage remarkable employees.

The Board agreed that they feel they have hit a sweet spot at this point in time in terms of staff members, defined position and working toward an environment that values and is valued by staff; they agreed a conversation is needed for a plan for when proposed budget decreases will occur.

Shifting work hours and related salary costs (as a result of staff configuration changes over the last few years) were discussed, including that the Selectboard Administrator position included a health insurance policy, while the Assistant Town Clerk position does not. The Town Clerk mentioned how it is a benefit to taxpayers and the Town to have the person who is the Delinquent Tax Collector present in the office during the day (in her position as Town Treasurer) when people are coming in to the office, rather than having them call someone in the evening.

John Brabant provided historical information about the Board's investigation over the past few years into the statute-defined duties of the Clerk, Treasurer and Selectboard, and how the Board strove to come to the point they are currently at.

The Treasurer and Delinquent Tax Collector will return to the Board regarding whether she feels she can work full-time as the Town Treasurer and fulfill Delinquent Tax Collector duties in addition to that. The Board was reminded that it plans to complete a formal job evaluation for the Town Treasurer in the next few months. The Board asked the Clerk to work on a list of job duties performed by the Assistant Town Clerk.

The Board clarified that the increase for two town office positions -- beyond the 2.7 offered to all employees -- is a market adjustment, not a merit increase, and is an effort to be keeping pace with other opportunities of a similar type, job-wise. For example, , the \$20 to \$22 per hour proposed increase includes a 2.7% increase that all employees will get plus a market adjustment; similarly, the Treasurer position includes the 2.7 increase plus an increase for market adjustment.

The Board discussed potential improvements for salary discussions, including incorporating intentional planning around building a number based on how much budget increase the taxpayers can absorb, reference of CPI, use of bonuses. The multiple challenges of an ever-

evolving world of expanding duties and responsibilities contributing to a moving target of defining static responsibilities attached to positions was reiterated.

Sharon Winn Fannon spoke to her discomfort to voting for merit-based numbers without a broader conversation around merit increases for all employees. John Brabant commented on his confidence in the budget process and confidence defending the numbers landed on for compensating staff for additional, necessary and demanding job responsibilities.

The Board looked at the budget figures in relation to the Woodbury Volunteer Fire Department Capital Equipment Fund. If this fund fails, the overall budget increase will be 1.42%. John Brabant reiterated his previous meetings' concerns over the significant cost of maintaining two fire departments, which is such a large portion of the budget, and instead spending discussion time hyper-focusing on relatively smaller amounts of money from office staff line items.

John Brabant moved the question, and Clif Emmons seconded.

Sharon Winn Fannon made a friendly amendment to include the language that the budget includes 2.7% salary increases across the board, with a couple of market adjustments. Clif Emmons seconded the friendly amendment and the motion passed unanimously.

The Town Clerk thanked the Board for their hard work, her appreciation for all of the members and emphasized the benefit that can result from continually improving the budget process.

The Board reflected on their discussion from the evening and agreed on near future discussion regarding having two fire departments in the budget and planning a process for next year.

5. Executive Session for Personnel Matters: This item was not needed.
6. Other Business: None.
7. Adjournment: John Brabant made a motion to adjourn at 8:38 pm. The motion was seconded, voted on and carried 5-0.

Date: 1/19/2019 Respectfully Submitted, Katie Lane-Karnas, Recording Secretary
Approved by the Selectboard at the 1/28/2019 meeting

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