

At our meeting Monday night, the chair raised the idea that a select board member may be available to engage more heavily in our road maintenance challenges. It was my understanding specifically that this member may be available to take the lead in working with the select board, the road crew, and interested townspeople in possibly re-engineering our approach to winter road maintenance related to timing, crew schedules, etc to better serve the town. I love the idea of someone on the board taking this on as our lead. But I do not support paying a select board member for the work.

Also, in our Monday meeting, we talked, in executive session, about conflict of interest. A member of the board noted a particular expenditure in the warnings and asked questions in executive session because it relates to personnel. The issue was the extent to which it is appropriate to pay an already employed person additionally when that person makes a contribution that may be outside his or her already compensated day-to-day responsibilities. We resolved that issue for the record, and I will not rehash it in my remarks today.

What struck me the next morning about that “conflicts” discussion, when my head was fresh, is the astonishing irony of engaging on conflict of interest in one circumstance as it relates to personnel – but completely failing to do so when it comes to the board itself. We all missed the conflict issue. Me too.

But it was clear to me the next morning I am not okay .... ever .... with paying select board members for additional work that some or even all of us perceive to be beyond the scope of a volunteer board. An annual and nominal stipend to the entire board is fine – many towns do that. But we need a hard stop at that point.

The integrity and tradition of small-town volunteer boards rest on the principle that we volunteer to do this work. If the job at hand crosses a line into work that is outside the scope of the board’s work, then it should be offered to the town for anyone to step into as a paid role. If a board ends up paying one of its own to do the work, that should be only as a last resort and after it is openly and fairly posted for applicants. The decision should be made after every effort is exhausted to get someone else to take it on as paid work, and the SB member in question should recuse himself or herself from the decision-making process. Every step should be on the record.

We cannot look at the work we do and give it greater value than the volunteer work others in town do. Paying ourselves to do work for the town is a conflict of interest. Period.

If – at any time – the work of the volunteer board becomes more than the volunteer can take on, then that’s where boundaries come in. As volunteers we need to set boundaries on what we can (and should!) do as volunteers. I raise this angle because I see a danger in “over volunteering.”

When one or a few people do everything, they hoard institutional knowledge. They become in control of too many things ... chief cook and bottle washer if you will. It becomes intimidating for anyone else to get involved. It looks like a job no one would want to volunteer for. It erodes the principle that in a small town, everyone steps up to do their bit. It undermines the integrity of a self-sustaining small community. The notion that many hands make light work may not be efficient or pretty or easy, but it maintains the vitality of a small town because knowledge and information is shared. We do not become too dependent on a single person. The work can be readily passed along because there are always other people familiar with the efforts. And people – even people with families and jobs – can find a way to contribute. That is the strength of a small community.

I know some may not agree with me, but I believe we are heading down a road that will destroy the volunteer spirit that is the foundation of small towns in Vermont. I fear we may have already lost that spirit on the board.