

## Selectboard Special Meeting Minutes

*Monday, December 16, 2019 at 7pm at the East Montpelier Town Offices*

**Present:** Denise Wheeler (Chair), John Brabant (Vice Chair), Rose Pelchuck (Member), Sharon Winn Fannon (Member), Clif Emmons (Member), Jerome Lipani (ORCA), Katie Lane-Karnas (Recording Secretary), Carl Etnier, Seth Gardner, Gene Troia, Amy Willis, Bruce Johnson, Toby Talbot (arriving 7:51 pm)

1. Call to Order: Denise Wheeler called the meeting to order at 7:08 pm, thanking the East Montpelier Selectboard for hosting the joint meeting following the Fire Department's budget presentation on December 5. The groups are tasked with review and discussion of the East Montpelier Fire Department (EMFD) budget.
2. Public Comment: None.
3. Review, Additions/Changes to Agenda: None.
4. EMFD Budget Review: The December 5 meeting included a conversation with the EMFD about challenges in keeping the Department fully staffed. Both Boards were in agreement that the numerous details impacting budget and staff recur every year at budget time, and they want to make a plan for a solution.

Staff expenses from FY20 are \$297,000; the increase for a fully staffed Department is estimated at roughly \$500,000 (the exact projected cost will vary depending on a number of factors, such as whether paramedics are on staff at a higher hourly rate). The group articulated options for going forward:

**OPTION 1:** Keep continuing as has been done in the past, which both groups agreed is not fair to the Department. The need for a fully funded staff has recurred yearly.

**OPTION 2:** Seth Gardner outlined an option to take the Capital Reserve Fund in a different direction, having a small amount of Ambulance revenue going into Capital Reserve to fund the smaller items needed; a yearly equipment request would have to go to a vote of the townspeople. This option's change to purchase of vehicles was considered as a means of controlling the purchasing of new vehicles. The rest of the money currently going to the Capital Reserve would instead be diverted to fund salary.

Not having a Capital Reserve Fund ultimately means having to increase the tax rate every time a vehicle is purchased. It could potentially impose a discipline in which less vehicles are purchased during the year (capital purchases would be only asked for directly from the voters at Town Meeting Day).

The group considered impacts of such a situation. The past number of years, the Boards had pushed the Department to create an accurate Capital Reserve Fund, to level out the funding being asked of the taxpayers, avoiding a sudden increase, and have realized this goal. The group was reluctant to change this achieved practice.

**OPTION 3:** Another option is to fully fund the staff, perhaps over a period of three years in which the impact to the tax rate is steady as money is raised incrementally (this option would keep the Capital Reserve Fund in place as it has been). The group considered the amount of an additional \$150,000 (2/3 responsibility East Montpelier, 1/3 Calais). For East Montpelier, the impact of an additional \$150,000 is a little over .03 cents. EMFD has stated that staff currently have full time jobs outside the Department which are covering medical insurance, vacation, sick pay, etc., and impact to budget would be significantly different for a per diem versus a salaried position; impact to budget would also be significantly different to have staff with full time jobs outside the Department. Toby Talbot pointed out that it is much easier to find per diem staff than full time salary staff in this area; per diem staff works well but does include volunteer administrative work and scheduling challenges. Toby clarified that there is neither an advantage nor an imperative to shift to full time salaried employees.

A question was raised: What is the check that if money is increased for fully funding, how are the Boards able to hold the Department accountable to details of the expectations?

Another idea suggested was 25% / 25% / 50% increase over three years, possibly permitting a clearer understanding of the implications and expectation for reporting on spending of an increased amount. John Brabant pointed out that the Boards are only approving a budget for the upcoming one fiscal year; even if there is a tiered three-year plan, the budget is to fund just the upcoming year.

Without the discussed increase to staff funding, the ambulance request is already a 10% increase. The group recalled that the Department is projected to be over approx. \$25,000 in salary (more accurately stated as compensation, as it is not technically “salary” with per diem staff). Toby Talbot has stated planning to slow down staffing and increase volunteers as the means to meet the salary line amount for this fiscal year. The Boards agreed that their empathy for volunteers would create a different dynamic in any discussion when they are no longer volunteers but rather paid per diems. Toby confirmed that with paid per diems, he and other volunteers would be relieved from volunteer shifts.

Discussion turned to resident appreciation and expectation for service in recent years. Ambulance is significantly more active and training more vigorous than it used to be. Rates to member towns (Plainfield and Marshfield) are priced by the Department. Toby Talbot clarified that Plainfield and Marshfield both receive 3% increases per year already (contracts were just renewed and are three years long).

Calais Selectboard did not make a decision on newly presented options and will learn what different impacts to the tax rate will be; their next planned meeting is Thursday December 19 and is a continuation of a budget development special meeting. They appreciated the

exhaustive work of EMFD volunteers and reiterated the need for a plan to get the Department to fully funded staff.

5. Other Business/Old Business/New Business: The Calais Selectboard stated that they are good with the noted boiler expense (\$837).
6. Adjournment: Rose Pelchuck made a motion to adjourn at 8:11 pm. The motion was seconded, voted on and carried 5-0.

Date: 12/17/2019 Respectfully Submitted, Katie Lane-Karnas, Recording Secretary  
*Approved by the Selectboard at the 2/10/2020 meeting*

*Click on the link below to view documents associated with this agenda:*  
<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1J1j1VJrzUuzenj9h6zUq-RjbjvPLIo1x>