

Board of Abatement Meeting Minutes

Monday, October 26, 2020 at 6:00 pm via Zoom conference call

Continued to Monday, November 9, 2020 at 6:00 pm via Zoom conference call

Continued to Monday, November 30, 2020 at 6:00 pm via Zoom conference call

Present: Denise Wheeler (Chair), John Brabant (Member), Rose Pelchuck (Member), Clif Emmons (Member), Judy Robert (Town Clerk), Barbara Butler (JP), Sandra Ferver (Delinquent Tax Collector); John McCullough (Lister), Jan Ohlsson (Lister), Wilson Hughes (Lister), Scott Bassage (JP), Charlotte Hanna Bassage (JP), Dillon Burns (JP), Katie Lane-Karnas (Recording Secretary), Stephen Mills, Joshua and Kristin Schultz

1. Call to Order: Denise Wheeler called the meeting to order at 6:05 pm and confirmed that a quorum of the Board is present. She identified the abatement request applicants and the associated SPAN numbers: Stephen Mills (#120-037-10587); Joshua and Kristin Schultz (#120-037-10892).
2. Approval of Minutes: Clif Emmons moved and Denise Wheeler seconded to approve the minutes of the August 12, 2020 meeting, with edits as noted. The motion was voted and passed unanimously.
3. Oaths of Office: The Chair swore in members of the Board of Abatement and the applicants and confirmed that no one had any conflict of interest on this matter. (It was not possible to circulate the oath signature paper due to the coronavirus-context video chat; each person swore the oath in a roll call.)
4. Mills Abatement Hearing: The Chair confirmed that applicants received rules and understood them. Stephen Mills' abatement request was submitted under the statutory criteria: unable to pay taxes, interest, and collection fees. He explained that as a result of COVID-19, he was furloughed in March, lost health care coverage at the end of May, and now has a part time job and reduced unemployment benefits. Since furloughed, he has experienced a "perfect storm" of expenses required on his home, a medical emergency, and he has provided housing for his two grown children who lost their jobs during the pandemic. He stated that he honestly doesn't know what bill to pay first and so hadn't specified how much abatement he is requesting. He noted he is in communication with the hospital about that bill. He has qualified for the Homestead Exemption and is not delinquent on his 2019 taxes; he requested a 50% reduction in his 2020 taxes and a payment plan.

The Board inquired if he had investigated federal mortgage relief options; he has and does not qualify because he has not missed a mortgage payment. Clif Emmons offered to provide links about federal mortgage payment deferral options. The Board inquired about if a "furloughed" position means he has a position that will be reinstated? Stephen Mills responded that it is not clear to him if that is the case (he described the circumstances with his employer). Charlotte

Hanna Bassage considered that furloughed means it is not a permanent firing. This decision may have implications for future applicants in the COVID-19 context where a furlough, a temporary situation, may be treated differently than a (permanent) firing. It would be hard to set up a deferment or payment plan with someone who does not have a job to anticipate returning to, which is different from a furloughed position. The Board continued questioning and Stephen Mills clarified that he does not have debt in collection at this time. He has been a property owner in Calais for 27 years. His daughter works part time but does not contribute income and has her own financial challenges. Dillon Burns offered utility bill assistance information. John Brabant pointed out that whatever taxes are abated, if the applicant is then able to pay due to a change in circumstances, that is fine, and he encouraged Stephen Mills to ask for what he really needs. The applicant changed his request to two-thirds the full amount. The Chair reiterated that the Board is here to help and encouraged him to let them know if there are other ways to help, and to reach out to Capstone.

5. Josh and Kristin Schultz Abatement Hearing: The Schultzes are requesting abatement under the criteria, “taxes in which there is a manifest error or mistake of the listers.” The Chair noted that this request is fairly self-explanatory for a total amount of \$773.92. Board members in a roll call had no questions and many appreciated the clarity of the presented documentation.

Jan Ohlsson made a motion to close the hearing for the Schultzes and keep the hearing open for Mr. Mills. The motion was seconded, voted, and passed unanimously.

Judy Robert made a motion to vote on the Schultz abatement request (\$773.92). The motion was seconded, voted and passed in favor of the requested abatement unanimously.

John Brabant made a motion and Judy Robert seconded to go into Deliberative Session at 6:50 pm in accordance with 1 VSA 312 (e) for the purpose of considering the abatement of applicant Stephen Mills. The motion was voted and passed unanimously. The Board came out of deliberative session at 7:04 pm.

6. Continuation of Meeting: The Schultz abatement request hearing was voted to be closed (see item 5 above). The Mills abatement request hearing was not adjourned; the Board decided to continue the deliberation on November 9, 2020 at 6 pm.

The Mills Hearing was continued as recorded below, November 9, 2020 at 6:00 pm by Zoom conference call.

Present: Denise Wheeler (Chair), John Brabant (Member), Rose Pelchuck (Member), Clif Emmons (Member), Judy Robert (Town Clerk), Barbara Butler (JP), Sandra Ferver (Delinquent Tax Collector); John McCullough (Lister), Jan Ohlsson (Lister), Wilson Hughes (Lister), Scott Bassage (JP), Charlotte Hanna Bassage (JP), Dillon Burns (JP), Katie Lane-Karnas (Recording Secretary), Stephen Mills

7. The Chair noted that after the first meeting, the Board sent information on resources to Mr. Mills. The Chair also identified a person at Capstone who can offer further assistance. Mr. Mills appreciated the ideas. Mr. Mills shared a situation that exposed him to COVID-19 at work (he is now in quarantine); he also learned since the last meeting that his employer who had furloughed him has terminated his employment and he cannot afford his health insurance this month. He is waiting for the hospital to respond to his request for further reduction of bill (the UVMC security breach has delayed their response). He is receiving unemployment benefits that reduce if he increases his work hours. His understanding is that he will continue to be paid (by his second job) through his current quarantine.
8. Executive Session: John Brabant made a motion to go into Deliberative Session at 6:15 pm in accordance with 1 VSA 312 (e) for the purpose of considering the abatement of applicant Stephen Mills. Clif Emmons proposed a friendly amendment to invite the Recording Secretary to join them. Denise Wheeler seconded the motion with the friendly amendment, and the motion was voted and passed unanimously. The Board came out of deliberative session at 6:58 pm.
9. Continuation of Meeting: The Mills abatement request hearing was not closed and therefore not adjourned; the Board decided to continue the deliberation on November 30, 2020 at 6 pm via Zoom conference call.

Date: 10/27/2020 and 11/11/2020 Respectfully Submitted, Katie Lane-Karnas, Recording Secretary

Approved by the Board of Abatement at the 2/1/2021 meeting

Click on the link below to view documents associated with this agenda:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1FB0miwxwGKY9cCuOwpPxAXol-B6kHiQG?usp=sharing>

The Mills Hearing was continued as recorded below, November 30, 2020 at 6:00 pm by Zoom conference call.

Present: Denise Wheeler (Chair), John Brabant (Member), Rose Pelchuck (Member), Clif Emmons (Member), Judy Robert (Town Clerk), Barbara Butler (JP), Sandra Ferver (Delinquent Tax Collector); John McCullough (Lister), Jan Ohlsson (Lister), Wilson Hughes (Lister), Scott Bassage (JP), Charlotte Hanna Bassage (JP), Dillon Burns (JP), Katie Lane-Karnas (Recording Secretary), Stephen Mills

10. Mr. Mills had been invited and attended the beginning of the meeting to answer any questions. The water system expenses Mr. Mills incurred were shared between the MCCC and another neighbor (the system is shared). Mr. Mills clarified that he lost his health coverage in May and has been paying \$420-388 per month through October and was unable to pay for this month. He will qualify for Medicare in December (\$160 per month) and will be eligible for social security. He hasn't received a reply from the hospital since their computer system was hacked and they can't access his account. Mr. Mills reiterated that he offers to use \$300 of his final payment from his former employer for tax payment and thanked the Board for their consideration. He is now working with someone from the Council on Aging to pursue resources.

11. Deliberative Session: Clif Emmons made a motion to go into Deliberative Session at 6:15 pm in accordance with 1 VSA 312 (e) for the purpose of considering the abatement of applicant Stephen Mills and invited the Recording Secretary to join them. Denise Wheeler seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

12. Decision in Mills Hearing: The Board resumed Regular Session at 6:34 pm.

Denise Wheeler made a motion to abate half of Mr. Mills's 2020 property taxes in half the amount (\$1,355.55) plus the penalty and interest for October and November and that he work with the Delinquent Tax Collector to make a plan to pay off the remaining \$1,355.55 and interest. The motion was seconded by John Brabant, voted and passed in favor of the stated abatement unanimously.

The vote authorized the Chair of the Board of Abatement to sign on behalf of the Board.

13. Adjournment: Rose Pelchuck made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 6:39 pm. The motion was seconded, voted, and passed unanimously.

Respectfully Submitted, Katie Lane-Karnas, Recording Secretary

Approved by the Board of Abatement at their ___ meeting