



Town of Thetford Vermont

3910 Vermont Route 113 • P.O. Box 126 • Thetford Center, VT 05075
802-785-2922 • thetfordvermont.us

Selectboard Special Meeting Minutes Thetford Town Offices (w/Virtual Attendance Option) Monday, January 24, 2022 7:00pm

Selectboard members present: Sharon Harkay (Chair), Mary Bryant, Nick Clark (via Zoom), Li Shen, Steve Tofel

Others present: Town Manager Bryan Gazda (via Zoom), Town Clerk/Treasurer Tracy Borst, Selectboard Assistant Martie Betts

Participating Community Members: Charlie Buttrey, Brigid Guttmacher, Alexis Jetter, Sherry Merrick, Tom Ward, John Bacon

Sharon Harkay called the meeting to order at 7:02 pm.

1) Agenda Review

No changes to the agenda.

2) Town Manager Report – Bryan Gazda

a) Update on Sayre Bridge

Bryan said he has received a quote to have the sign redone, as damage to the sign is not something we want to piecemeal together. The replacement will be somewhere between \$850 to \$1000, with a one-day charge of \$2500. There has been no identification yet of the driver or the company the truck belonged to.

b) Other

The budget has had some adjustments because of the auditor's end of fiscal year 2021 review.

3) Public Comment

Charlie Buttrey asked if the decision had been made to have town meeting in person or remotely. He is on the schoolboard, and they need to know in order to finish their meeting preparations. Sharon Harkay said they were going to talk about the mask mandate first and then decide about town meeting.

Brigid Guttmacher, treasurer for the Historical Society, said the signs were paid for with donations from the community not through the town. Brigid said there is some money left in the fund, but they are hoping the damage will be covered by the town's insurance.

Bryan said there is a \$1000 deductible with the insurance.

Brigid said she will take it back to the board and get back to you.

Alexis Jetter said she supports a continuation of the mask mandate, noting the high levels of infection, and the hospitals that are paralyzed with the huge numbers of COVID patients. Alexis had emailed a letter and graphic of a sign that she would suggest changing to. The sign says "No Mask No Service" and explains why it's a good idea to wear one. Alexis spoke about local businesses and the different experiences she has had with regard to the policy. She suggested that it might not be residents, but people from outside of Thetford who don't adhere to the policy. Expressing concern for people who are at high risk, Alexis said it was time to step up.



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4) Discussion on Possible Extension of Mask Mandate

Li Shen said she agreed with everything Alexis said, but it was a very clear message from business owners that if employees were going to have to enforce the policy there were fears about their employees leaving.

Sherry Merrick agreed that there needs to be a mask mandate. She also spoke of being in local businesses where people were not wearing masks. Sherry said it was discouraging that people weren't watching or paying attention and that a sign like Alexis suggested might make some people hesitate before they come in the door.

Sharon said when this was discussed the last time, they talked a lot about whether or not we were going to add enforcement and we agreed that we were not going to do that for the good of the community. Sharon said she has been in businesses and has seen different levels of compliance depending on the time of day and who is in the business. The clientele can differ from business to business. At this stage, we cannot change the mandate, we can only extend it.

Nick Clark thanked Alexis for her letter, which he thought was very articulate, and he agrees with what she wrote. While extending the mandate may not change anyone's behavior, we need to keep trying. Nick would be in favor of extending the mandate.

Mary Bryant shared some information given to her by the school nurse and felt that the best she can do is wear her mask.

Sharon said there was a chart about wearing masks that she had seen in a newsletter from Senator Sanders. She had hoped this would help enlighten us with town meeting, but it can also help us at this point. The chart tells us how much time is safe depending on whether people are wearing a mask and what kind. Sharon is in favor of extending the mandate for another 30 days. Steve Tofel said he is in favor of extending the mask mandate, and questions whether we have the authority to tell a business that they must deny service.

Motion by Mary Bryant that we extend the present mask mandate for another 30 days.

There was further discussion about the effectiveness of some of the information presented.

VOTE by Roll Call: Steve Tofel – in favor, Li Shen – in favor, Nick Clark – in favor, Mary Bryant – in favor, Sharon Harkay – in favor **Motion passed**

5) Discussion about Town Meeting – location, time, other

Sharon said she believed if we had N95 masks that were handed out at the door, we could have a very safe meeting. Late this afternoon Sharon got an email from Deecie Dennison, the town moderator (*Sharon read the email which stated her preference to not meet in person, even with masks*). Sharon said while she may feel totally comfortable and sincerely believes that everyone would be safe, if our moderator doesn't want to do this, she now has reservations.

Mary Bryant had the same thought about how Sharon might feel comfortable, but other people will not be. Mary said she feels it might be more inclusive to have the meeting online.

Sharon said she has had people comment to her that they would like to have an in-person meeting. She wondered if maybe the informational hearing could be a hybrid.

Li said we adopted a mask mandate because we are in a very bad pandemic. We shouldn't have an in-person town meeting. Now that we know a little bit more about those charts and the masks, she doesn't even think we should have informational hearing in person. Li said we could be disenfranchising more people by doing it in person.



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Sharon said she is thinking about the people who aren't set up in their homes to attend virtually. Nick pointed out that it's not just the Town Moderator you're requiring to run the whole meeting, it's the whole Board of Civil Authority. There are more than a dozen you would be requiring to risk their health for that meeting. We do have vaccines this year, but cases are overwhelming hospitals. Nick said he didn't think it was right to make people choose between their health and democracy and giving up their health so they can vote is a big ask compared to voting on a ballot while there is still a global pandemic.

Sharon said there are towns in Vermont that are going ahead and meeting with their regular meetings, so Thetford wouldn't be alone in their decision.

Steve Tofel said with a hybrid meeting, a person could listen in on Zoom if they were uncomfortable with attending in person. I would be in favor of having a hybrid meeting for the Informational Hearings.

Sharon said if we were doing the hybrid meetings, she would like to ask the Town Manager to order N95 masks.

Steve asked if the meeting could be held in a larger room?

Sharon asked Tracy if decisions about the Informational Hearings had to be determined at this meeting or could it wait until next week.

Tracy said the warning needs to be signed, and they were noticed in the warning in 2021.

Nick added that informational hearings follow the same Open Meeting Laws for any public body, plus whatever the legislation says with the current COVID provisions.

Sharon said that another discussion should be whether or not to continue have in-person Selectboard meetings.

Steve said he wanted to raise the issue one more time about postponing town meeting. He realizes that will lead to the discussion about not having an approved budget. Instead of having an unapproved budget for 2 months, we would have an unapproved budget for 5 months if we decided to hold the meeting in May. Steve said that then brings up the question of why we don't go onto a fiscal year instead of a calendar year, so we weren't faced with this every year.

Sharon would like to see us hold to the original date. There are elections that are important. We have people who are waiting to leave their positions and we would have to appoint a lot of people because there would be these gaps between when they thought they were being done and when we finally held town meeting.

Nick wanted to add that not having an approved budget is a very delicate way of saying we're spending money we don't really have. We can't go to a fiscal year budget without having an 18-month budget, or we would have a 6-month budget to make that transition. Either way instead of raising 3 million we'd be raising 4.5 million in 1 tax budget. It's not as simple as switching our calendars, we'd have to raise a lot of money. We can set up a capital fund and build up to do that and it's been talked about in the past, but no one has ever set it up.

Steve said he was not convinced you couldn't do a 6-month budget, followed by a 1-year budget to cover the 18 months that way. The VLCT certainly made it an option.

Nick said you would still be sending out 2 tax bills in one year.

Steve said people would be able to pay their taxes quarterly or semi-annually.

Sharon added that Susan Senning sent information which is in the packet, that explain the pros and cons of changing the fiscal year, and the different ways to do it.



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Motion by Li Shen to hold the Town Meeting remotely this year on February 26th and to vote by Australian ballot on all the articles on March 3rd.

Tracy said that past practice has been holding a pre-town meeting the Monday before town meeting. Last year, informational hearings were held on Monday and then a Saturday informational meeting, and then voting on Tuesday. Your motion states February 26th as a remote town meeting. You cannot hold a remote town meeting. If you move for your town meeting articles to be voted by Australian ballot, then your meeting on Saturday is an informational hearing, and the question is if you are going to have an informational hearing on the Monday before.

Motion amended by Li Shen to say the town shall hold an Informational Hearing on February 26th and an Informational Hearing with a candidates' forum on February 21st.

VOTE by Roll Call: Mary Bryant – in favor, Steve Tofel – in favor, Nick Clark – in favor, Sharon Harkay – in favor, Li Shen – in favor **Motion passed**

Sharon confirmed that the school board meeting will begin at 9 am on Saturday, followed by the Town Informational Hearing at 10 am.

6) Discussion of S.222, Temporary Open Meeting Law Procedures in Response to COVID-19

Sharon said the Governor has signed new legislation saying that we don't have to have a physical location for meetings for the time being.

Martie Betts, Selectboard Assistant explained what that would mean for committees and commissions that come to Town Hall and log into the town equipment in order to use the Zoom account.

Nick said during the first part of COVID he did exactly what Martie had explained. He would log into all of the committee and commission meetings and turn the host capabilities to whoever was going to be running the meeting. Since Martie and Tracy said they are willing to do that for anyone that does not want to be at Town Hall, that answers that question.

Sharon said they will leave it up to the committees and commissions how they want to meet. In terms of the Selectboard, she would like to see us continue the hybrid up until elections and then let the new Selectboard decide.

Steve agreed, as did Mary.

Li felt there was no reason not to be 100% remote immediately.

Sharon said anyone could be remote if they are not comfortable being in person.

7) Request from the Treasure Island Exploratory Committee

The Selectboard discussed the request from the Treasure Island Exploratory Committee to give a presentation at the Informational Meetings about the work they have been doing.

The Selectboard members agree that this was not the place for individual committee presentations, and they were free to have their own meetings to do that.

Li pointed out that this group does not publicize their group meetings properly, so the public is not sure where they are meeting and when. They should start doing that first, and then people will know the work they are doing.



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Nick pointed out that normally Town Meeting was only discussion of the warned articles. The only way it would fit in is under the budget discussion and they don't have a specific line item. Unless we start doing this for every committee, it's not really a function of Town Meeting. Sharon said as their liaison she will let them know.

8) Presentation and Request from Tom Ward concerning Wake Boats on Lake Fairlee

Tom Ward gave a presentation about the effects of Wake Boats on small lakes and asked the Selectboard to write a letter of support for a petition authored by Responsible Wakes for Vermont Lakes.

Motion by Steve Tofel to write a letter of support for the petition.

Li said she would write the letter.

Motion called. **VOTE: All in favor (5-0-0) Motion passed.**

9) Final Acceptance of 2022 Budget, Selectboard Report and Warning

Bryan started the discussion by reviewing the final changes made to the budget, explaining that some came from the auditor. He confirmed that radar signs have been included.

Steve Tofel said he wanted to add \$500 to the Selectboard Chair's stipend, as the chair puts in more work than the rest of the members.

There was discussion about where the extra money could come from.

John Bacon said he thought they should leave that alone right now and make it a discussion for down the road.

Nick said that while the Selectboard chair can easily put in 40 hours a week, ideally we have the longest tenured town manager that should be taking more and more responsibilities from the Selectboard.

Li agreed that we shouldn't make the change right now and that the town manager should take over more, such as making the agendas and other things.

Mary felt that more is getting done and accomplished as a town because Bryan is taking over many more things, but she still sees the chair putting in many more hours than the others. She supports the stipend.

Motion by Li Shen to table this discussion until after town Meeting.

Nick said the stipend could be increased after town meeting.

VOTE by Roll call: Mary Bryan – opposed, Li Shen – in favor, Nick Clark – in favor, Sharon Harkay – in favor, Steve Tofel – opposed **Motion passed**

Motion by Sharon Harkay that we accept the Town of Thetford proposed budget January 2022 through December 2022, as revised.

Nick said the budget numbers are on the warning so when you vote on the warning you vote the budget. It does not need to be done separately.

VOTE by Roll Call: Mary Bryant – in favor, Steve Tofel – in favor, Sharon Harkay – in favor, Li Shen – in favor, Nick Clark - abstain **Motion passed**

Motion by Sharon Harkay to accept the Selectboard report written for the Thetford Town Report, as edited. All in favor. **Motion passed**

The Selectboard reviewed the Warning for the Town Report.



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There was discussion about the \$50,000 surplus in the highway budget and what should happen with it. Nick felt it should not be used for projects in 2022, as the tax rate would increase in the future.

Motion by Nick Clark to amend the article by \$50,000 and move it into the paving fund.

Mary Bryan – opposed, Steve Tofel – opposed, Li Shen – in favor, Sharon Harkay – opposed, Nick Clark – in favor **Motion failed**

Motion by Steve Tofel to approve the Town Meeting Warning, as edited. **VOTE by Roll Call:** Mary Bryan – in favor, Steve Tofel – in favor, Li Shen – abstain, Nick Clark – abstain, Sharon Harkay – in favor **Motion passed**

10) Scheduling of Special Selectboard Meetings on January 26th and 31st

The Selectboard moved their January 26th special meeting to Wednesday Feb 2nd at 3:30 pm.

This is an anticipated Executive Session.

The Selectboard will hold a special meeting on January 31st to approve the Town Report.

Nick Clark left the meeting at 9:33 pm.

11) Warrants and Minutes

Motion by Mary Bryant to accept the minutes of the special Selectboard meeting of January 10th, 2022, as amended. All in favor. **Motion passed**

#1.2	\$22,465.21
#1.4	\$28,372.53
#2.1	\$9,043.30
#2.2	\$11,879.40
#2.3	\$975.32
#3.1	\$47,702.88
#3.3	\$182,747.60
#4.3	\$168,870.05

Motion by Li Shen to approve the warrants as presented. All in favor. **Motion passed**

12) Adjourn

Motion by Steve Tofel to adjourn the special Selectboard meeting at 9:48 pm. All in favor.

Motion passed