



Town of Thetford Vermont

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Selectboard Regular Meeting Minutes Thetford Town Offices (w/Virtual Attendance Option) Monday, December 4th, 2023 7:00 PM

Selectboard members present: Chair Sharon Harkay, Vice Chair David Goodrich, David Forbes, Li Shen, Steve Tofel (via Zoom)

Others present: Town Manager Brian Story, Town Clerk/Treasurer Tracy Borst, Selectboard Assistant Martie Betts

Participating community members: Bill Huff, Heinz Trebitz, Nolan Riegler, Erica Ko, and Cynthia Shelton in the meeting room

Sharon Harkay called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM.

1. Agenda Review

Sharon said she would like to add an executive session after warrants and minutes to discuss results of the Town Manager performance review and its impact on the Town Manager's compensation. The Selectboard agreed to add it.

2. Notes from the Selectboard Chair

Sharon wanted to remind the Selectboard and community that the first budget review meeting would be on Wednesday with the second meeting on the following Wednesday. The Conservation Commission will have a presentation on the Connecticut River hydro dam re-licensing at their meeting on January 10th, 2024 at 7:00 PM.

3. Town Manager Report

Brian said the road crew has started out well, but it will be easier to manage the roads as the temperatures drop because they will firm up. The DPW will bring on a seasonal employee to assist with the work for the next couple of months. While they don't have a CDL, they have experience working with the equipment that doesn't require one to use. Brian said the Police Department is proceeding at pace on hiring a new law enforcement officer.

4. Public Comment

Cynthia Shelton said she would like to work with a local photographer and have pictures taken of the town committees and commissions for posterity.

5. Discuss whether or not to have an article on the 2023 Town Meeting Warning about changing all voting to Australian ballot.

Sharon said there are two ways to get article on the warning, the Selectboard can decide by majority vote that it wants to put the article on, or a resident can submit a petition with signatures from at least 5% of voters to the Town Clerk.

If all articles move to an Australian Ballot vote, town meeting becomes an informational meeting with no way to change any numbers in the budget. At this point the ballot has already been created.

The proposal is for all articles to be voted on by Australian Ballot. The question is do we want it at all, and which aspects of voting would we want to consider.

David Goodrich said he had been approached by residents who are not able to get to the Town Meeting, and they felt excluded from voting. This would allow everyone to be able to vote.

Steve Tofel said there had been push back for holding Town Meeting in bad weather, and he wondered if it was possible to set up a rain date with a procedure for cancelling or rescheduling a meeting.

Sharon said she brought that up immediately after last year, asking the Lyme NH Town Clerk how they handled it. In New Hampshire there is a very explicit requirement about what the weather report has to say before they are allowed to go to their alternate pre-established date. We would have to come up with a way to get the word out to all our residents even if the power was out.

Brian Story said he is not aware of any contingency plans in existence in Vermont, other than a few towns that have it as part of their charter.

Li Shen expressed concerns that Town Meeting is slowly dying out and one of the reasons is the Australian Ballot. There is a lot of good about people being able to debate an article and be able to change it.

Sharon spoke about moving to Vermont and being delighted in the idea of Town Meetings because it was extremely important to pull the community together and to give people a chance to change those budget numbers. It's a complicated process to revise the budget if it's voted down by Australian Ballot.

David Forbes expressed concerns about the loss of the event of Town Meeting itself, and the community aspect of it.

David Goodrich pointed out that there could still be debates during an informational meeting which would indicate why something was being voted down. David pointed out that some people do come in and vote with no or very little information.

Cynthia Shelton said she met a woman who said she was intimidated to attend Town Meeting and perhaps people could be encouraged people to attend by having fundraiser, selling food, and offering rides.

Sharon said she tried last year to get different groups to do food in mid-morning or offer lunch, and to have high schoolers do childcare as a fundraiser, but there was no interest.

Jody Biddle asked David Goodrich to elaborate. David said some people feel they are in a minority and don't want to stand up and vote against something everyone else is voting for. There are people who have to work on Saturday or whose kids are in sports, or the weather is bad, and people can't get to the Town Meeting.

John Bacon asked about the state law in regard to Australian Ballot voting and still having a Town Meeting. He thinks voting should all be by Australian Ballot as he has always been disappointed to have 100 people show up and the budget passes and that's it.

Bill Huff pointed out that regardless of what happens, you are never going to satisfy everybody. Some people are not going to make it to Town meeting, and you can't enforce people to be informed.

People have the right to vote whether they are informed or not. Bill said the most important loss would be the inability to amend anything that comes up. It's particularly important to be able to adjust the budget at the Town Meeting. He expressed concerns that the Town Meeting would die, and residents would wind up with a listserv debate which he felt would be horrible. Civil debate should bring us all closer together, not divide us.

Tracy Borst said in her first year as Town Clerk the school budget had to be voted on three times before it passed. If everything moves to Australian Ballot there will not be a Town Meeting, although you will be required to have informational meeting. Tracy said she supports having a Town Meeting because it's part of our heritage in Vermont. She would be interested to see some effort to increase attendance, help people feel less intimidated, and provide more information about the process.

Discussion continued.

Motion by David Goodrich that we include an article on the 2023 Town Meeting warning regarding changing all voting to Australian ballot. VOTE by roll call: Steve Tofel – not in favor, David Forbes – in favor, Li Shen – not in favor, Sharon Harkay – not in favor, David Goodrich – in favor (2-3-0). **Motion failed.**

6. Discuss whether or not to have an article on the 2024 Town Meeting Warning about continuing to pursue the idea of adding a part-time social worker position.

Sharon read the wording of possible article.

John Bacon stated opposition as there is infrastructure already in place.

Steve Tofel said the position needs to be defined. Once you attach a dollar amount to it, we are obligated. We should pull back a bit so we can see what the budget is going to be and also work with Bugbee, who is going to need a social worker. We are only asking the question, should we explore this or not.

Jody Biddle said The Elder Network is very interested in this. People in this community don't follow through, or they experience feeling powerless with the support that is offered. Brian said that it's important to know what this position will look like and he recommends building a job description.

There was continued discussion about whether it was premature to put it on the warning without a full description and the ability to answer questions.

The Selectboard agreed that since there is already a plan to continue to pursue the position, it did not need to be on the warrant.

7. Discuss whether or not to have an article on the 2024 Town Meeting Warning about allowing green card holders to vote at Town Meeting and for Town Elections.

Sharon said this article is about allowing non-citizens the right to vote in local elections.

Steve said that two people who were awarded the Citizen of the Year award at the last Town Meeting are not eligible to vote. Burlington, Winooski and Montpelier have passed this, and it would need the approval of the legislature.

Sharon said a person should be able to vote if they are paying taxes. All 3 towns that passed this have a town charter, and we need to find out from our town attorney whether or not we can even do this because we don't have a town charter.

Heinz Trebitz said he and his wife have been living in Thetford for the last 30 years and have had plenty of opportunities to really serve the town, thus being able to yield some influence even without being able to vote. Nevertheless, if you are not allowed to vote, you are some kind of second-class citizen. Heinz said he needed to get permission to speak at the Town Meeting. The town absolutely has recognized their service to the town, but they have failed to really acknowledge a certain diversity in the population.

Brian said he believes that there would have to be a charter. Typically, a charter is the mechanism used for modifying a state statute at the local level.

Bill Huff pointed out the logistics of this, saying if someone is going to be eligible to vote they should be eligible for everything. Otherwise, you are opening up another class of voters. The Town Clerk would have to prepare a separate check list. Poll workers would have to identify them, give them a separate ballot, and there would have to be a way to count them. There is a path for non-citizens to become citizens, which would allow for voting on anything. Why would we adopt a position that would usurp the pathway to citizenship?

The Selectboard authorized Brian to reach out to the town attorney for more information if Steve doesn't get the answer from VLCT.

8. Decide which Selectboard member will write the draft of the Selectboard annual statement for the Town Report (due February 1st, 2024)

Li Shen will write the draft.

9. Discuss whether or not to continue paying our share for the IREC for the coming year.

Sharon said they have received the annual letter asking if we are going to continue to participate in the IREC program through Two Rivers. It is the same amount of \$15,540.00 split between 2 years. Jeff Grout is the new coordinator.

Erica Ko, the Energy Committee representative to IREC, spoke in favor of continuing, citing the benefits to the town.

Brian added that Jeff has been very helpful as a contact person concerning the HVAC project at Town Hall.

Bill Huff said he would rather put the money into proactively preparing for the effects of climate change.

Motion by David Forbes for the Town of Thetford to continue to pay our part of the share for the IREC consortium program in the amount of \$15,540.00. VOTE by roll call: Steve Tofel – in favor, David Forbes – in favor, Sharon Harkay – in favor, Li Shen – in favor, David Goodrich – in favor (5-0-0). **Motion carried.**

10. Warrants and Minutes

#24.4 \$22,558.04

#25.3 \$255.38

#24.2 \$4,834.81

#45.1 \$96,294.75

Motion by David Goodrich that we accept the warrants as presented. VOTE by roll call; Steve Tofel – abstain, David Forbes – in favor, Sharon Harkay – in favor, Li Shen – in favor, David Goodrich – in favor (4-0-1). **Motion carried.**

Motion by Sharon Harkay to accept the Selectboard meeting minutes of November 20th, 2023, as edited. VOTE by roll call: Steve Tofel – in favor, David Forbes – in favor, Li Shen – in favor, David Goodrich – in favor, Sharon Harkay – in favor (5-0-0). **Motion carried.**

11. Added Agenda Item; Executive Session to Discuss Town Manager Review and its Impact on Compensation.

Motion by Sharon Harkay to enter Executive Session to discuss the evaluation of an employee and its impact on that employee’s compensation, and to invite Brian Story to the first part of the discussion per 1 V.S.A. § 313(3)(a)(3). VOTE by roll call: Steve Tofel – in favor, David Forbes – in favor, Li Shen – in favor, David Goodrich – in favor, Sharon Harkay – in favor (5-0-0). **Motion carried.**

The Selectboard returned to open session at 9:47 PM.

Motion by Sharon Harkay that we raise Brian Story’s salary to \$91,500.00 as previously agreed, effective December 18th, due to his excellent performance evaluation.

Sharon explained that when Brian was hired in June, it was negotiated that in 6 months they would do a performance evaluation and if it was good, they would give him another \$2000.00 at the start of the second six months.

VOTE by roll call: Steve Tofel – in favor, David Forbes – in favor, Li Shen – in favor, David Goodrich – in favor, Sharon Harkay – in favor (5-0-0). **Motion carried.**

12. Adjourn

Motion by Steve Tofel to adjourn the Selectboard meeting at 9:48 PM. VOTE by roll call: Steve Tofel – in favor, David Forbes – in favor, Li Shen – in favor, David Goodrich – in favor, Sharon Harkay – in favor (5-0-0). **Motion carried.**