

SPECIAL SELECTBOARD MEETING
November 3, 2021
Minutes

Present:	Bill Cleary (chair) Lee McClenny Dave Baczewski	Callie Hamdy Greg Barrows Nanette Rogers
Guests:	Colleen Nesto Jamie Hazen	Karen Danaher Kati Anderson

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 p.m. The meeting was held in person and via Zoom.

CHANGES TO AGENDA

Added discussion on Misty Meadow Forest Management and Risk Management Form for Recreation Department.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

ESSEX RESCUE FY'23 BUDGET PROPOSAL

Colleen Nesto and Karen Danaher from Essex Rescue were present to discuss Essex Rescue's budget proposal. Essex Rescue is requesting \$7,059, an increase of 31.5%. Their vision is to promote a mostly volunteer workforce but continue to develop exceptional healthcare leaders and dedication to training and mentorship.

They provide 24/7 ambulance coverage, paramedic level care, file of life cards, annual subscription plan, public education, CPR classes/First aid, participate in school safety committee, stand by for community events, ballistic gear and training for active-threat situations, and evidentiary blood draws for Essex Police. They have a combination workforce of paid and volunteer employees, although volunteers are difficult to come by, and burnout and fatigue is common. Most calls are falls, sick persons, and breathing problems. Psychiatric problems and suicide attempts are up from previous years. Factors increasing requests for ambulatory services are rising average age in the community and a rise in mental health problems.

One of the reasons for the increase is that 15-20 years ago they were able to fully staff with volunteers and now they are up to nine paid full-time staff and some part-time staff just to keep ambulances on the road. Payroll is now a big factor that was not there previously and accounts for over half their budget. They have the second lowest per-capita rate in the state. They are also currently looking at a new building as their new ambulance does not fit in the garage at their current location and the location of the current building in a flood plain which means expansion is not possible. None of the operating budget will go towards this project.

Lee asked what percent of Westford's population is covered by Essex Rescue. It was about one-third of Westford Residents, around 764 people. Bill complimented Essex Rescue on the quality and professionalism they provide Westford but explained that the large increase was difficult to wrap his head around. Karen explained they have stretched the funding as much as they could. Hiring more staff has been a critical issue. They are running a deficit this year and project one in FY'23. When they run out of money, they would simply have to shut their doors.

Lee echoed Bill's praise for Essex Rescue. Bill asked if they considered shifting the load of the step-increase, he thought the leap from FY'22 to FY'23 was quite extreme. Colleen explained that this increase was to cover the deficit and funding of the second ambulance. COVID had a huge impact on their personnel. They have lost most of their long-term people and you cannot just put people on an ambulance, it takes a long time to train them. Bill asked if there were any state ARPA funds that could help them? They had used CARES money for additionally PPE, but they were not eligible for the next round and the State will no longer assist them with PPE supplies. Bill asked how many calls they responded to in Westford the previous year? Colleen will get back to the Board with numbers.

Dave shared the sentiment that it is a hard increase to work into their budget. It would have been nice to have a more gradual increase, but he understands why it is being done this way. Bill asked if they have reached out to any state representatives? This sounds like it is a problem for more than just Essex Rescue and it may need to be resolved on the Legislative level. Colleen explained they had been in contact with the Legislature and were able to get funds for training providers; it is a continued process. This is a nationwide problem and there are even talks of importing EMS providers from other countries to fill the gap. Karen reemphasized that fire, police, etc. are considered essential service, but emergency medical services are not considered essential.

Bill appreciates they have put the step increase in for the Board to review. Understanding that some of it may be a moving target, how dedicated to those numbers are they? Karen explained it would depend on factors like call volume and volunteer availability. They will reassess the step process every year. Bill thanked Essex Rescue for their time and expressed hope that things would change for the better in the coming year.

DRAFT CAPITAL BUDGET

Greg and Nanette prepared the draft capital budget. They wanted to get the draft to the Board tonight so that it could be looked at and familiarize themselves with it before greater discussion next week. Bill asked who determines the replacement years for some of the items such as the fire and highway trucks. The department determines the lifespan of their respective equipment.

Bill thought that the work Nanette and Greg have done was enormous and that the document's importance was paramount for the Town. Greg was cautiously optimistic because there appears to be more funds in the reserve accounts than he thought; probably because an item was paid for from the annual budget, but the funds were not transferred from the Reserve Fund for the expense. Nanette feels that FY'23 is where the Board should focus on right now as that figure goes to the voters in March as part of the overall proposed budget. Based on some investigative work Nanette did on prior years. Greg feels comfortable that what was done is correct. The second step is to go through and identify when those items were bought and how they were paid for.

Dave feels that if reserve accounts are holding too much money, we need to make decisions on what to do with that. He looks forward to digging into it more but feels it would be helpful if Greg and Nanette could come back and explain which accounts need a further look. Bill was concerned about the anticipated cost column. The inflation has been effective there, some of the things that are coming due we may see potential price increases on. Greg thinks reevaluating some items may also be helpful. Bill thinks this highlights the importance of preventative maintenance. Lee trusts our department heads but if he were in their position, he

may want further expertise to offer their opinion on the replacement cycle for the equipment. Lee feels it is disconcerting that we have such a discrepancy. Greg feels the discrepancies we are finding will be in our favor, but this could be something that happened ten or more years ago. We do not know that yet.

FY'21 AUDITORS' REPORT

The Auditors submitted their report for FY'21 which Greg presented the draft of. There was nothing that stuck out to Greg. A lot of it is the same as the previous year and the results are not surprising. The General Fund is up about \$95,000 from FY'20, the Highway Fund also has a favorable balance. Greg notes the auditors are giving us an adverse opinion. This is only due to the fact the Town operates on a cash basis which is not in accordance with GASB, but that has been happening since the accounting method was switched to a cash basis and is not an area of concern.

Also included is the management letter, which the Town is required to do every year. The Treasurer and Selectboard chair will sign verifying their accounts and cooperation. Bill asked how many years we have done this type of audit? We had been doing this since 2013 when the Charter took effect, and we are required to do it yearly for transparency. In the eight or so years we have been having audits they have found nothing of concern. The cash-basis change, despite not being in accordance with GASB, was at the suggestion of the auditors.

HEALTH INSURANCE OPTIONS FOR 2022

Open enrollment starts November 1st. Nanette provided the Board with a history of the Town's health insurance benefit. Historically the Town has offered the benefit for the employee only and paid 100% of the premium. Currently the Town offers the Platinum Plan or a high deductible plan. If an employee chooses a high deductible plan, the Town takes the difference in the premium and pays it to the employee to fund a Health Savings Account. The Board needs to decide if the Town should stay with MVP or switch carriers, and if it wants to continue to pay 100% of the premium for a single person policy.

MVP's rate is lower than Blue Cross Blue Shield. Nanette explained these are similar plans and numbers as last year. Bill was content to stick with MVP. Lee and Dave agreed. Lee McClenny made a motion to choose MVP for town employees' health insurance, and that the Town continue with its existing policy of paying 100% of the premium for the employee and not offer two person or family member plans, and that the benefit will be calculated using the Platinum Plan premium for employees who select a high deductible plan, seconded by Dave Baczewski. Motion passed: 3-0.

BORNSTEIN TRAIL PERMIT FOLLOW UP

A few weeks prior the Board had a request to revoke a trail permit issued to Ben Bornstein. Mr. Bornstein's request is based on the Court Order issued in 2001 allowing him to use the trail. The Town Attorney advised that this would not be a risk to the Town and that Ben had access through the court order. Lee asked if citizens of the Town have the right to know if something is taking place, such as Mr. Bornstein bringing in a large piece of equipment and use the trail to access his property. Is it not the Town and the people's right to know if something is taking place even if Mr. Bornstein has every right to go forward accessing his land?

Nanette believes that the Court Order is extensive in its explanation but does clarify that he is responsible for repairing any damage. Lee asked if this would impact other trails in town?

Nanette explained that was not expanded on, as this instance is specific to the Court Order and Goodrich Trail. Jamie Hazen was present and had read the Court Order. He was a neighbor whose residence was on the Trail. It was his understanding that the Court Order pertains to timbering not recreation. Bill clarified that there is an explanation that says "timbering and all other pursuits" so it is open to all uses Bornstein may desire. Kati Anderson, another resident, was present and read a part of the Court Order. Based on what Kati read Bill believes it pertains to economic uses. Dave and Bill were comfortable going forward with rescinding the trail permit. Lee believes every property owner has a right to access their property but believes there should be a process to it. However, if the Town Attorney believes we should proceed than he agrees with that.

Lee McClenny made a motion that the Board rescind the requirement for a trail permit for Benjamin Bornstein to access his property over the Goodrich Trail, seconded by Dave Baczewski. Motion passed: 3-0.

MISTY MEADOWS FOREST MANAGEMENT

The Town received a request for students at the Essex Center for Technology (CTE) to perform some forest management practices in Misty Meadows, which is the town owned land located behind the school. This would be for timber stand improvement and would teach students about timber management. Nanette expressed concerns about the equipment the students may be using and suggested a waiver form signed by the parents be submitted as well as a certificate of liability insurance listing the Town of Westford as an additional insured. Bill agreed. CTE was able to furnish the required insurance.

Bill read a comment from Ethan Tapper who explains it is a good way to get folks used to forest management on town property. Ethan will work with the Conservation Commission to put signage up explaining the work that had been done and to remind residents that the Town lands are an active forest. Nanette thinks a post on Front Porch Forum would be a good idea; she will contact the Conservation Commission about doing so. Lee McClenny made a motion to grant permission to Chittenden County Forester Ethan Tapper and students from the Center for Technology in Essex to perform work training on the Misty Meadows during this winter providing that they furnish the insurance documents and waivers, seconded by Dave Baczewski. Motion passed: 3-0.

RISK ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

The Recreation Committee is applying for a grant that requires the completion of a risk assessment questionnaire. Most of the questions were easy, but Greg wanted to check with the Board regarding a couple items that required clarity. Greg read these questions aloud to the Board. The Recreation Committee will need to keep track of the items required.

ADJOURN

The meeting adjourned at 8:40 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,
Bill Cleary, Selectboard Chair

Callie Hamdy
Assistant Town Clerk/Minute Clerk