

Minutes of the East Montpelier Selectboard

May 4, 2020 Selectboard Meeting

This meeting was conducted remotely using the Zoom conferencing platform. Participation options were provided to the public.

SB Attendance: Chair Seth Gardner, Jon Jewett, Amy Willis and Carl Etnier; Town Administrator Bruce Johnson

Public Attendance: Paul Cate (town tree warden)

Chair Gardner called the meeting to order at 6:34 p.m.

Additions to Agenda: None

Minutes:

Chair Gardner presented the draft minutes of the April 13, 2020 board meeting.

Motion: To approve the April 13, 2020 minutes as presented. Made by Ms. Willis; second by Mr. Jewett. Passed unanimously.

Public Comment: None

Consideration of Resilient Roads Committee's Recommendation of Contractor to Handle Ash Tree Management Pilot Project

The town received 4 bids in response to the request for proposals issued for the ash tree management pilot project in the Gallison Hill/Wheeler/Schoolhouse Roads area:

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| ○ Vermont Arborists, Inc. | \$13,500 |
| ○ Marshfield Tree Service & Logging LLC | \$13,925 |
| ○ Foxfire Tree Care LLC | \$29,600 |
| ○ Field's Logging & Excavation | \$40,000 |

The Resilient Roads Committee, which reviewed the submissions last week, recommended that the Selectboard award the contract to Vermont Arborists, Inc. subject to reference checks. Mr. Cate, acting in his dual role as committee member and town tree warden, reported that the references were all positive. Mr. Cate noted that the Vermont Arborists, Inc. bid covers the entire project and is significantly below expectations. The VT Forests, Parks and Recreation grant funding this project anticipated around \$20,000 to be expended on ash tree removal, so the committee will be looking for a suitable location into which to extend the project. Mr. Cate noted that East Montpelier is one of the first towns in Vermont to attempt active management of roadside ash trees in response to the emerald ash borer threat. The town's pilot project will be a valuable learning experience both for the town and the state as a whole.

Motion: To accept the Resilient Roads Committee recommendation to award the ash tree management pilot project contract to Vermont Arborists, Inc. and authorize TA Johnson to complete the necessary contract documents. Made by Mr. Etnier; second by Ms. Willis. Passed unanimously.

The East Montpelier Resilient Roads Committee has been awarded the 2020 Arbor Day award by the VT Urban and Community Forestry Program for going above and beyond in its efforts on behalf of the East Montpelier community forests. The Selectboard asked Mr. Cate to convey heartfelt congratulations to the committee for the well-deserved recognition.

Discussion on Town Employee Northeast Delta Dental Plan

The dental plan, purchased through VLCT, is run on a fiscal year basis, so the new plan starts July 1st. There are no changes in terms this year, with the cost remaining at \$37.19/employee/month. By consensus board members agreed to allow the contract to auto-renew as is.

Town Treasurer Report: Don Welch, Town Treasurer

TA Johnson presented the financial update developed by Treasurer Welch. The town remains on budget, with no significant changes in revenue or expenditure expectations since Treasurer Welch's last report in March. Two minor revenue areas, interest on savings and land record fees, are down markedly over the past two months. Both declines are directly related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The land records revenue decrease will likely rebound quickly now that the state has loosened restrictions on real estate activities. The interest decline is expected to linger into FY2021 and possibly beyond. The town conservatively budgets for interest income, so the effect on the predicted FY2021 revenues is very small.

Discussion on Town Management in Light of Covid-19

Continuing a conversation the board started in March, members discussed a variety of issues related to property tax payment timing and penalties, town payments to schools, and potential revenue shortfalls as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. The town's second and final 2019-20 property tax installment is due May 15, 2020 and the linked town payment to the school district is due soon thereafter. Currently early tax payments are running a bit behind last year's pace. Since the bulk of the town's tax revenue is paid over to the state's education fund in the form of direct payment to the school district, any shortfall has a significant effect on the town's bottom line. Another concern is that the penalty and interest tacked on to the amount due if a taxpayer fails to hit the May 15th deadline would compound the widespread economic suffering caused by Covid-19. Selectboards have no power to alter any aspect of property tax collection set by town voters, such as due dates and penalties. The Vermont Legislature, however, has passed a bill to temporarily allow governing bodies to move deadlines, waive penalties & interest, and adjust municipal tax rates. The bill has not yet been signed by Governor Scott. The board will revisit this issue at its May 18th meeting.

The town office and garage are operating under the revised guidelines that took effect May 4th:

- Employees have completed the required training;

- Employees at all work sites must pass a pre-work health survey every day;
- Municipal Assistant Sparrow's workstation has been relocated to the large entrance area on the other side of the counter from the clerk's area to enable mandatory spacing; and,
- The town office remains closed to the public, but researchers and attorneys can once again access vault materials under the terms originally set up before all in-person activities were banned:
 - One at a time and only by appointment from Town Clerk Laquerre; and,
 - Mandated protocols (masks; health survey; sanitizing between uses) are in effect for such appointments.

Warrants

- **April 27, 2020 Special Warrant for Review**
 - As required by board policy, the special warrant approved by Chair Gardner was presented to board members for review. No action was necessary.
- **May 4, 2020 Warrant for Approval**
 - Board members reviewed the warrant. Following a protocol developed at the board's April 13th meeting to deal with the difficulties inherent in individually signing a warrant during a remote meeting, board members decided to approve the warrant by motion and have Chair Gardner sign the warrant as certification of the board approval.
 - **Motion: To approve the May 4, 2020 expense warrant and authorize Chair Gardner to sign the warrant on behalf of the board.** Made by Mr. Etnier; second by Mr. Jewett. Passed unanimously.

Chair Gardner signed the warrant.

Other Business

The town received a public records request regarding the costs to the town for emergency service dispatching. Since the town's dispatch needs are funneled through the independent East Montpelier Fire Department, the costs are part of the annual contract payments to EMFD. It appears the request is related to an effort to support a centralized dispatching service. Board members will bring up the topic at the June 11, 2020 meeting between EMFD and the EM and Calais Selectboards.

Town Administrator Report

- Update on EM Village Sidewalk Project:
 - The project remains on hold due to Covid-19 limitations. Utility work is ongoing to complete necessary line shifts to already-installed new poles so that the old poles can be removed.
- Update on Lister Deadlines:
 - The listers remain on track for a "normal" preliminary grand list filing in early June. There is likely to be a significant issue with the state homestead filing – at this point over 300 filers from last year have not filed this year and with the state income tax deadline extended to July 15th, this situation is unlikely to change prior to the grand list filing. This will result in large numbers of "change of appraisal" notices going out in early June and then again in late July/early August

as the homestead filings come in. This is more of a costly paperwork game – the net effect will likely be minor.

- The state has changed vendors for the grand list management software (from NEMRC to Axiomatic) effective in late 2021. This will result in some alterations in how assessment software elements are handled, such as CAMA (which is provided by NEMRC now) and the Marshall & Swift cost tables (formerly provided to towns through a contract with the state, but now municipalities will be charged standard market pricing).
- Meeting Schedule:
 - May 18, 2020 6:30 pm Selectboard regular meeting
 - June 1, 2020 6:30 pm Selectboard regular meeting
 - June 11, 2020 7:00 pm EMFD budget & service update at ESF

Zoning Administrator Report

- There have been 4 new applications since the April 13th SB meeting. There have been 10 zoning permit applications in 2020.
- There is no DRB meeting scheduled at this point, although it appears likely that there will be a need for a June meeting.

Motion: To adjourn. Made by Ms. Willis; second by Mr. Jewett. Passed unanimously.
Meeting adjourned 7:34 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Bruce Johnson, Town Administrator

Approved: May 18, 2020 East Montpelier Selectboard meeting