

## **Minutes for the East Montpelier Selectboard**

### **January 30, 2023 Selectboard Meeting**

**This meeting was held in-person at the Municipal building with a remote participation option using the Zoom conferencing platform.**

**SB Attendance:** Chair Seth Gardner, Carl Etnier, Jon Jewett, Town Administrator (“TA”) Gina Jenkins

**Remote SB Attendance:** Amy Willis, Judith Dillon

**In-Person Public Attendance:** Sean Temple and Rowan [NAME], ORCA Media; Deirdre Connelly; Michael Duane

**Remote Public Attendance:** Deb Fillion, Town Clerk Rosie Laquerre

Chair Gardner called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

#### **Additions to Agenda:**

None.

#### **Minutes:**

The board reviewed the draft minutes of the January 17, 2023 board meeting and made a few edits for clarity.

**Motion: To approve the January 17, 2023 minutes with tonight’s amendments.** Made by Mr. Etnier, second by Ms. Dillon. Passed unanimously.

**Public Comment:** None.

#### **Finalization of FY2024 Budget**

Chair Gardner suggested the Board consider adjusting the FY2024 budget to use ARPA funds to mitigate some of the budget increases. He suggested this because the school’s budget increase is expected to raise the tax rate by nine cents and the current draft of the FY2024 budget is expected to rate the tax rate by six cents, leading to a total expected increase of fifteen cents in the coming year.

Ms. Dillon noted that the group has been working on the current budget draft for months and that the public has been notified about the expected increases. She added that the increase will eventually come, and worried about large spikes in future years if the town tries to keep the tax rate low this year. Chair Gardner noted that the reason the school increase is so high is because East Montpelier’s Common Level of Appraisal (“CLA”) has dropped below 85%. The state allocates less state funding to schools when a town’s CLA is lower than 85%, and so that has led to the school’s nine cent increase on the town tax rate.

The group discussed the CLA and the impact on the town’s tax rate. Mr. Etnier explained that the Department of Taxes compares the appraised home values to sale prices for the past three years to determine the CLA, which is then used to calculate the education tax rate for the town. TA Jenkins noted that East Montpelier will need to be reappraised because the CLA has dropped below 85%. Mr. Etnier suggested that the town should focus on managing its own finances and let the school manage theirs.

Chair Gardner noted that the Board can't change the school's budget but can change the town's budget in response to the school budget.

TA Jenkins clarified that if the Board decides to adjust the budget to utilize ARPA funds, she would suggest adjusting the top line number "available cash on hand". She explained that this is a surplus built into the budget and carried over from year to year. By raising it from \$123k to \$250k the tax rate increase would drop to 2.65 cents. She added that this surplus is separate from the reserve fund, which would not be impacted by this budget change. TA Jenkins pointed out that she and Town Treasurer Pallas are planning to look for costs already incurred that could be offset with ARPA funds. She gave the example of the land records digitization project and noted that the expenses for that project were already paid but could be reclassified as ARPA-eligible expenses so the town could essentially reimburse itself for those costs. She added that she agreed with Ms. Dillon's point that the tax rate could spike after a few years of using ARPA funds to keep it low or level. TA Jenkins also noted that she and Town Treasurer Pallas aim to use ARPA funds to cover one-time expenses like the digitization project, and not for recurring expenses like salaries.

Ms. Dillon pointed out that if East Montpelier needs reappraisal, taxpayers will see an increase once that takes effect. She added that she did not think the Board should be making last-minute changes to the budget and that this year would likely not be an outlier. Ms. Dillon voiced appreciation for the desire to maintain a lower tax rate but thought it was unrealistic.

TA Jenkins noted that the tax rate won't be set until August 2023. She added that by then, she and Town Treasurer Pallas should have more information on how they can utilize ARPA funds and can potentially adjust the tax rate with that information in mind. Chair Gardner added that by August the town will have the final figures from the state on their contributions to the school. Ms. Fillion noted that the town's reappraisal will not happen quickly. She explained that over 100 towns need to do a reappraisal and there are a limited number of companies who can do the work. Mr. Etnier added that he'd heard the reappraisal capacity for the state is approximately 15 towns per year. Ms. Fillion noted that if the housing market cools and the CLA goes up in a few years, the school's impact on the tax rate could go down again.

Chair Gardner suggested the Board offer the current budget for a vote at Town Meeting. If the town passes the current budget, the Board will still have an opportunity to adjust the tax rate later this calendar year. If the town does not pass the current budget, the Board can consider making additional changes. TA Jenkins stated she felt this was a good approach.

**Motion: To approve the FY2024 budget as presented.** Made by Mr. Etnier, second by Ms. Willis. Passed 4-0. Chair Gardner abstained from the vote.

### **Finalization of 2023 Town Meeting Warning**

TA Jenkins noted that Lauren Oates has resigned from the Planning Commission. TA Jenkins added a line to the warning for this vacant seat on the Planning Commission. Town Clerk Laquerre explained that if someone is elected to the seat, they will serve the remaining two years of the three-year term. If no one is elected to the seat, the Selectboard can appoint someone to serve for the year until the next Town Meeting, when that individual or someone else can run for the seat.

Mr. Etnier noted that the language was a little unclear and suggested it read "remaining two years of three-year term". Mr. Jewett asked if the ballot language must match the warning and Town Clerk Laquerre stated that it does need to match, and that there are specific requirements for the language used on the ballots. Mr. Etnier suggested Town Clerk Laquerre present the updated language to the company

that prints the ballots, and if it does not meet their guidelines the language can revert to what was used in past years.

Mr. Etnier noted that the Governor signed a bill giving towns the flexibility to vote on Town Meeting articles entirely by Australian ballot through 2024, and that the legislature is considering a bill to make a more permanent change to allow towns that same flexibility. Mr. Etnier noted that the Board had talked about adding a discussion to Town Meeting to get input on how the town should respond to increased illness or other circumstances. He stated that he didn't think this discussion needed to be on the warning because it will not be a binding vote, and Mr. Duane confirmed that was correct. Chair Gardner suggested stating it on the floor and publicizing through Front Porch Forum before Town Meeting.

**Motion: To approve town meeting and town forum warning as amended.** Made by Mr. Etnier, second by Mr. Jewett. Passed unanimously.

### **Finalization of 2022 Selectboard Annual Report**

TA Jenkins noted that there were no major changes to the draft since the last meeting. The Board accepted the draft and thanked TA Jenkins for her work.

### **Consideration of Deputy Tree Warden Position Description**

TA Jenkins asked the Board to review the position description drafted by Paul Cate and Jeff Cueto. Ms. Dillon asked if the position was unpaid. TA Jenkins clarified that there is a \$1k stipend and Ms. Dillon suggested including that in the description to make it clear this is not a salaried position. TA Jenkins will add language about the stipend to the job description.

### **Discussion on Town Management in Light of COVID-19**

Using the CDC's community level tool, Washington County is at "Low." The latest data is as follows:

- Case Rate per 100,000 population: 37.67
- New COVID-19 admissions per 100,000 population: 7.3
- Staffed inpatient beds in use by patients with confirmed COVID-19: 3.7%

Mr. Etnier read the language he drafted about masking at Town Meeting: "All who attend Town Meeting are requested to wear high quality masks, N95 or similar. We want everyone in our community to feel safe attending town meeting, and many people are immunocompromised, live with someone who is immunocompromised, or would otherwise benefit from widespread mask use in a crowded indoor space."

Ms. Willis agreed with encouraging masking but suggested not specifying the mask type. Ms. Dillon agreed with that suggestion. Mr. Duane suggested changing the first sentence to simply say "Masks are encouraged".

Mr. Etnier asked if there was space in the town report for the language and Town Clerk Laquerre suggested adding it to the section on how to vote. The final language included in the town report will be: "Masks are encouraged, and they will be available. We want everyone in our community to feel safe attending town meeting, and many people are immunocompromised, live with someone who is immunocompromised, or would otherwise benefit from widespread mask use in a crowded indoor space."

### **Warrants: January 30, 2023 Regular Expense Warrant**

Ms. Dillon asked how often the town pays for the website and TA Jenkins stated she thinks the payments are quarterly. Ms. Dillon asked what services the company performs, and TA Jenkins stated that they host the site and offer support if the town office has questions or runs into issues.

The present board members signed the warrant.

### **Town Administrator Report**

TA Jenkins noted that the company offering Saturday trash pickup at the Town Office does not have an active state hauling permit and the pickups have stopped. She added that she has not received any calls from people missing the service. Ms. Fillion noted that she spoke with the woman who cleans the Town Office and learned that she had been taking Town Office trash to the Saturday pickups for free. The cleaner is now absorbing the cost to take trash elsewhere. TA Jenkins added that she and Town Clerk Laquerre have talked to the cleaner about this and are planning to pay for the trash removal costs for the Town Office.

TA Jenkins noted that Zoning Administrator Brown will be on vacation the weeks of February 20<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>. He will be available if needed but he will not be able to hold office hours during those two weeks.

Chair Gardner asked when TA Jenkins was planning to address the County Road closure request. TA Jenkins stated she plans to have a discussion at the 2/27 Selectboard meeting.

Meeting Schedule:

- February 13, 2023 6:30 p.m. Special meeting date
- February 27, 2023 6:30 p.m. Special meeting date
- March 6, 2023 6:30 p.m. Regular meeting date/Town Meeting Forum
- March 7, 2023 9:30 a.m. Town Meeting

### **Other Business**

None.

**Motion: To adjourn.** Made by Mr. Jewett, second by Mr. Etnier. Passed unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at 7:50 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Deirdre Connelly.

Approved February 13, 2023 Selectboard meeting.