Office of Board of Selectmen

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Selectmen's Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, February 5, 2025, 10:00 am
Belmont Mill, Tioga Meeting Room

Present were Chairman Ruth P. Mooney, Selectman Jon Pike, Selectman Travis O'Hara, Selectman Sharon Ciampi, TA Alicia Jipson, Executive Assistant Colleen Akerman, Town Planner Karen Santoro, Police Captain Steve Akerstrom, Fire Chief Deb Black, Assistant Fire Chief Don Pickowicz, DPW Director Craig Clairmont, General Assistance Director Donna Cilley, Police Chief Mark Lewandoski.

Also present were Concord Police Department K-9 Officer Lenny O'Keefe and Comfort Dog Liberty, Kelly Bourgeois of Doggonit Training, and Claire Hebert-Dow, Community Relations Associate for Melcher & Prescott Insurance.

Absent: Selectman Claude "Sonny" Patten, Jr.

Those present stood for the Pledge of Allegiance.

Review & Approve Minutes – 01/22/2025:

Selectman Travis O'Hara moved the minutes of the public meeting held on January 22, 2025 as written; seconded by Selectman Jon Pike. Motion passed (4-0).

New Business:

2025 Deliberative Session Review:

There were no amendments to the budget or warrant articles and everything will go on the ballot as is. With staff, there were about 60 in attendance. Voters Guides are available on our website and at Town Hall. Chairman Mooney said it went well and Selectman O'Hara noted there was good discussion.

Cemetery Trustees Alternate Appointment Requests:

Cemetery Trustee Alternate Members Norma Patten and Kevin Sturgeon have resigned and the Trustees have two new candidates for appointment until March 2025.

Selectman Pike moved to approve Katie Eaton and Barbara Binette to serve as Cemetery Trustee Alternates until March 2025; seconded by Selectman O'Hara. Motion passed (3-0-1). Selectman Ciampi abstained due to her membership as a Cemetery Trustee.

2024 Updated Hazard Mitigation Plan Approval:

Board members received PDF electronic copies of the updated plan. There were no comments or questions. The grant money has already been received and there is one page to sign and return.

Selectman O'Hara moved to approve the updated 2024 Hazardous Mitigation Plan as prepared in accordance with the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000 (DMA), Section 322, Mitigation Planning; seconded by Selectman Ciampi. Motion passed unanimously (4-0).

Fire Chief Comfort Dog Request:

Fire Chief Deb Black spoke about her request for a comfort dog for the fire department. She has solicited input from Police Captain Steve Akerstrom and Police Lieutenant Evan Boulanger as well as the Board of Selectmen. A comfort dog would be funded through donations with no expense to taxpayers. The dog would be handled by Chief Black and live with her as well. There is a long list of things Comfort Dogs do. Comfort Dog Liberty is here with her handler K-9 Officer Lenny O'Keefe from the Concord Police Department.

If approved, this would be the first fire department comfort dog in New Hampshire. Many fire departments in the south and west have comfort dogs. Right now they are only with police departments in NH. Officer Lenny O'Keefe said both of the prisons and the Rockingham County Jail have comfort dogs for staff, as well as the 911 Center in Concord, UNH and Endicott College. In some communities a group debriefing for first responders is not completed without a comfort dog in the room. He explained some of the things they do such as assist with traumatic events, the Child Advocacy Center and work with school students. Chairman Mooney asked if the dog stays with the handler all the time, and it does but it is owned by the municipality because of liability/Primex coverage. If Officer O'Keefe goes on vacation, another handler takes her. They have created a non-profit organization to cover costs so that it does not cost the taxpayers anything. They work with community partners for food, veterinary services and grooming. Chairman Mooney had some concerns about being busy and juggling training and classes with the typical schedule. Chief Black answered that she is already doing training now, and firefighter training is never finished. Kelly Bourgeois of Doggonit Training has offered her services for training and handling. This is a great opportunity for Belmont first responders and schools, as well as Town employees. Chairman Mooney asked about the commitment for a dog if the handler may retire soon. Chief Black stated she does not expect to retire immediately and could continue to be a part of the department to continue the comfort dog work. Something like this might be covered under the Call Firefighter line. TA Jipson asked for clarification if the Town would need to purchase the dog or if it would be donated. Claire Hebert-Dow will finance the cost of the dog and other donations would be collected for food and veterinary services. Chief Black is looking for confirmation that the Board is interested in pursuing a comfort dog before proceeding with any further work or research.

A non-profit organization will need to be created which should be for any type of K-9 for the Town. We can work off of the paperwork Concord used for their non-profit. TA Jipson asked if this type of work would take time away from the Town. Chief Black said no, any additional activities would be above and beyond her regular scheduled time. Training is social

and can involve the schools such as stopping begging or teaching students how to act around dogs. They would also attend events like Trunk or Treat and Deck the Village because Chief Black is already working those events. Claire Hebert-Dow talked about how she started the process of helping with K-9s. She was instrumental in helping with funding for our previous Police K-9, Vito. There was some discussion with the Board about union support. Chief Black said she is not part of the union and this would not take anything away from the union. The firefighters like having a dog in the firehouse. Chairman Mooney and Selectman O'Hara recommended working with the police department on a non-profit organization for K-9s because the police department is actively looking for a new K-9 officer.

Selectman Pike moved to allow Chief Black to pursue obtaining a Belmont Fire Department Comfort Dog; seconded by Selectman O'Hara. Motion passed unanimously (4-0).

TA Jipson will check on the insurance questions and Chief Black will start the leg work to move forward and create a non-profit and obtain donations. It is recommended that Comfort Dogs obtain their therapy dog certification and AKC Canine Good Citizen. Tom Murphy is in support of the comfort dog because this type of program helps retain staff and helps with mental wellness. Selectman O'Hara thanked Ms. Hebert-Dow and Ms. Bourgeois for their attendance and support. General Assistance Director Donna Cilley commented this is an amazing opportunity. Chief Black said she is dedicated to the Town of Belmont, but will assist other towns and organizations if it works out. She will spend time at Town Hall, and the Highway, Police and Fire Departments as well as the schools.

Annual Report Printing Bid Results:

This year the printing for the Annual Report was put out to bid and Wharf Industries was the low bidder. We are going to try them out. They had nice samples and the woman who is solely in charge of the project is a Belmont resident.

USPAP Review by NHDRA 2024 Tax Year – Findings/Conclusion:

A copy of the letter from NHDRA with the USPAP review was provided to the Board. NHDRA reviewed the USPAP book outlining how KRT completed our appraisal. KRT performed per the standards and the USPAP complies with all of the requirements and applicable laws and regulations.

Police Department Intent to Retire Letter – Sgt. Dave Estes:

Sgt. Dave Estes has officially submitted his resignation with his last day on February 28th. Captain Steve Akerstrom said they are still trying to fill the prosecutor position. Interviews have been completed but they will continue looking. Sgt. Estes will return part-time after his separation period to help out with prep, training and discovery. He will not be going to court. Captain Akerstrom and Lt. Boulanger will be in court.

The department is also looking to hire a certified officer with 16 years of experience. He is a former K-9 officer and his K-9 is only 4 ½ years old. They can go back to training and get back into service.

The department is also interviewing for a part-time dispatcher to use for relief. They have an applicant with 24 years of experience who currently dispatches elsewhere.

They also have two other people who applied for full-time positions and one who applied for part-time work. They are completing background checks.

Chairman Mooney moved to give approve to hiring Joseph Guerriero and K-9 Falco for full-time patrol work; seconded by Selectman Pike. Motion passed unanimously (4-0).

Other New Business:

DPW Equipment Repairs:

DPW Director Craig Clairmont reported on some major breakdowns. They current have 3 trucks instead of 5 for the storms. One of the trucks had to be towed to Manchester because no one else has the tools to work on the issues. The estimate is $4,000-$8,000. Another truck is at Lakes Region Truck Service with issues related to the new emissions. There are a few other issues and the estimate is $16,000. They would like to take the larger bill out of the Heavy Equipment Capital Reserve Fund so as not to deplete their equipment repair budget of $26,000 this early in the year. There was $186,000 in the CRF before this year and they will be using $74,000 for the new truck.

Chairman Mooney moved to allow the cost of the repairs for the 2012 International to be removed from the Heavy Equipment Capital Reserve Fund; seconded by Selectman Sharon Ciampi. Motion passed unanimously (4-0).

Everyone is asked to be patient because DPW is currently down on equipment and personnel.

Old Business:

Other Old Business:

Annual Report & Voters Guide:

The Board was asked to review the draft letter for the Annual Report and make comments and suggestions.

TA Jipson explained Selectman Pike asked for a copy of a tax bill with breakdown to be placed in the Voters Guide showing an average home and tax bill. It notes that the Town is a pass-through and makes large payments out to the School, the County and the State. Selectman Pike suggested it also be placed in the paper. He requested copies to hand out at the School Deliberative Session on Thursday. There was discussion about the incoming storm and DPW Director Clairmont recommended the School reschedule for Saturday to keep as much traffic off the roads as possible. DPW Director Clairmont will contact Superintendent Tursi right away about rescheduling for their Saturday snow date if possible. General Assistance Director Donna Cilley mentioned the school is having a lot of conversation about state aid and school funding. There was some discussion about budget cuts for the schools. Chairman Mooney again noted that the Board of Selectmen has no control over the school district and their budget. DPW Director Clairmont reported that he spoke with Superintendent

Tursi and he was considering calling the DPW to discuss the Thursday storm and rescheduling their session to Saturday. They will keep us posted on their decision.

Default Budget:

Selectman Ciampi previously asked TA Jipson for an update on the default budget. The Board receives a report with the percentages, but what does it really mean? What did the departments lose? TA Jipson surveyed Staff and had the following report:

"The past year has presented significant financial challenges due to operating under a default budget. The following outlines the key impacts on various departments and the implications of a continued default budget moving forward.

Land Use:

- Planned purchase of a filing cabinet was reduced to one due to space constraints.
- Ink and supplies for the plotter printer were not purchased, and maintenance was delayed.
- General office supplies were carefully rationed, which is not sustainable long-term.
- Support staff at Planning Board and Zoning Board meetings was reduced to minimize overtime costs.
- Legal services were used sparingly, and Code Enforcement cases were strictly reviewed before utilizing legal services.
- Preventive maintenance on the Code Enforcement vehicle was postponed, affecting its lifespan.
- Fuel usage was closely monitored, and inspections were grouped by location to reduce costs.
- Conservation Commission was unable to conduct invasive species mitigation, leading to uncontrolled spread.
- Staff morale remains stable but is declining due to concerns about another default budget.

Buildings & Grounds (B&G):

- No new truck was purchased, leaving the department with an aging vehicle that does not meet operational needs.
- No mulch or lawn fertilizer was purchased for the town grounds.
- No painting was conducted unless existing supplies were available.
- No replacement tools were purchased, leading staff to use personal tools.
- No lift rental for pressure washing buildings, thus putting off maintenance needs.

Police Department:

- National Night Out was canceled.
- One Drug Take Back event was canceled.
- Only one cruiser would have been purchased without ARPA funds instead of the planned three.
- Difficulty in attracting candidates due to low starting wages ($23.85/hour compared to surrounding towns offering ~$30/hour).
- Union contract failure further limited recruitment efforts.

- Persistent staffing shortages, ending the year five officers short, including one position cut due to budget constraints.

Parks & Recreation:

- Old Home Day:
  - Fireworks were eliminated.
  - Event planning was impacted due to reduced dedicated hours, affecting vendor participation.
- Park & Beach:
  - Pavilion roof replacements postponed.
  - No additional grass seed or fertilizer purchased.
  - No repainting/replacement of signs at the park and beach.
- Programs & Community Services:
  - Unable to add new continuous programs.
  - Unable to provide planned free senior programs.
  - Budget constraints created hesitation in spending, reducing flexibility, and anxiety.
- Long-term concerns:
  - No movement on establishing a municipal capital reserve fund, delaying much-needed Town Hall relocation and facility improvements.
  - Aging park equipment and lack of funding for compliance with new RSA park regulations remain significant challenges.

Library:

- Limited participation in professional development opportunities.
- Fewer museum passes available to the public.
- Reduced acquisition of new books and materials.
- Delayed updates to public computers and printers.
- Increased administrative time spent on budget monitoring and searching for alternative funding sources.
- Rising costs in 2025 for the library circulation system and downloadable books/audio.
- Unmet community needs for improved printing, faxing, scanning, and payment services.

Fire Department:

- Training & Education: Limited budget restricted attendance at outside training and fire academy classes, impacting firefighter development.
- Pagers Request Denied: ARPA funding request for new pagers was rejected, despite their critical role in emergency response. Current pagers are outdated and difficult to repair.
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Shortages: Budget constraints mean there is barely enough for one full set of gear per firefighter, leading to mismatched and ill-fitting equipment, creating safety concerns.
- Aging Apparatus Costs: Maintenance costs are high; even basic servicing (oil, filter, lube change) costs around $1,000 per vehicle, limiting funds for other necessary repairs.

- Overtime Budget Exceeded: A $20,000 budget cut and an employee on light duty led to an overrun in overtime expenses, with the department exceeding the budget by $5,360.35.
- Fire Prevention Materials Cut: Lack of budget meant the department couldn't provide usual fire prevention materials for schools and visitors.
- Station Deterioration: Cracking walls, malfunctioning garage bay doors (delaying response times), and lack of funds for basic maintenance and improvements impacted both functionality and morale.
- Low Morale: Due to budget cuts and denied requests, firefighters feel defeated, and morale is at an all-time low, especially as they face another uncertain budget year.

Implications of a Default Budget for the Town as a Whole:

A municipality that does not receive proper funding experiences a gradual decline in essential services, infrastructure maintenance, and overall community well-being. Without adequate financial resources:

- Public safety is compromised due to insufficient police staffing and outdated equipment.
- Infrastructure deteriorates as road maintenance, building repairs, and park upkeep are delayed or neglected.
- Economic development is stifled due to reduced investment in community projects, deterring businesses and residents from settling in the town.
- Resident satisfaction declines as public amenities and events are reduced or eliminated.
- Emergency response and disaster preparedness efforts are weakened due to limited funding for necessary resources.
- Staff retention and recruitment challenges increase, resulting in higher turnover and reduced efficiency in municipal operations.
- Long-term financial instability leads to higher costs in the future as deferred maintenance results in more significant repairs and replacements.

Conclusion:

The constraints imposed by a default budget have impacted every department, reducing services, delaying maintenance, and hindering community growth. If another default budget is implemented, the long-term effects will become even more pronounced, including further infrastructure decline, difficulty retaining and attracting staff, and increasing limitations on Town services. It is necessary to address these financial shortfalls to ensure the sustainability of essential services and future community development.

Recommendations:

- Re-evaluate budget priorities to prevent further operational disruptions.
- Explore alternative funding sources, such as grants and community partnerships.
- Advocate for a sustainable municipal capital reserve fund to address long-term infrastructure needs.
- Adjust compensation structures to remain competitive in staff recruitment and retention.

Moving forward, strategic planning and community engagement will be crucial to mitigating the negative impacts of a continued default budget."

Public Comment: None

Next Meeting: February 19, 2025 at 10:00 am.

Non-Public:

Chairman Mooney moved to enter non-public session in accordance with RSA 91-A:3 II (c, L and e) at 11:25 am; seconded by Selectman Ciampi. Roll Call 1: J. Pike – aye, T. O'Hara – aye, S. Ciampi – aye, R. Mooney – aye. Motion passed (4-0).

Those present and voting were Chairman Ruth P. Mooney and Selectmen Travis O'Hara, Jon Pike, and Sharon Ciampi. Also present were TA Alicia Jipson and Executive Assistant Colleen Akerman.

The Board discussed ongoing litigation with regards to an employment matter. It was the consensus of the Board to agree to allow our legal counsel access to non-public minutes in defense of the litigation by whatever means is deemed necessary by law.

The Board reviewed additional information regarding the IT bids, and recommended a 3-year contract with the option to extend it to 5 years. A vote will be held when the Board returns to public session.

The Board discussed an abatement settlement, a deferral application and three hardship abatements. It was the consensus of the Board to stay firm on the settlement amount recommended by KRT. No decisions were made on the deferral or hardship applications.

TA Jipson informed the Board about a recent Right To Know (RTK) request.

Chairman Mooney moved to exit non-public session at 12:24 pm; seconded by Selectman O'Hara. Roll Call 2: S. Ciampi – aye, T. O'Hara – aye, J. Pike – aye, R. Mooney – aye. Motion passed (4-0).

Selectman Pike moved to approve Umbral Technologies as the new IT provider for the Town of Belmont; seconded by Selectman O'Hara. Roll Call 3: S. Ciampi – aye, J. Pike – aye, T. O'Hara – aye, R. Mooney – aye. Motion passed (4-0).

The Board discussed the dedication of the Annual Report.

The Board discussed a solid waste hauler licensing issue.

Selectman Pike moved to authorize Belmont's Code Enforcement Officer to enforce the Solid Waste Ordinance; seconded by Selectman O'Hara. Roll Call 4: T. O'Hara – aye, J. Pike – aye, S. Ciampi – aye, R. Mooney – aye. Motion passed (4-0).

Adjournment:

Chairman Mooney moved to adjourn the meeting at 12:32 pm seconded by Selectman O'Hara. Motion passed unanimously (4-0).

Ruth P. Mooney, Chairman

Claude B. Patten, Jr., Selectman

Travis O'Hara, Vice Chairman

Sharon Ciampi, Selectman

Jon Pike, Selectman