

Town of Brookfield Annual Meeting
1725 Ridge Road
Brookfield, VT 05036
March 5, 2024

Moderator: Gregory Wight

Selectboard members present: John Benson, Chair, J. Keith Sprague, III, Stuart Edson, C. Curtis Koren and Betty Lord.

Also present were Carol J. Monness, Town Clerk, several other Officers of the Town, and many other legal voters of the Town of Brookfield.

Moderator Wight called the meeting to Order at 10:00 A.M.

The meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

John Benson announced new features which included recording of the meeting by Vermont Public. He also mentioned that Carol Monness' sister, Carla Preston was present to record the minutes of the meeting and that another sister, Cheryl Lasell was involved in getting the Town Reports printed and mailed to Brookfield residents.

Moderator Wight read the Articles listed below to be discussed as they appeared on the Warning.

1. *To elect all officers as required by law for the ensuing year by Australian ballot. For this purpose, the polls will be open from 9:00 AM to 7:00 PM.*

Moderator Wight advised that the polls are open and active until 7:00 P.M. tonight.

2. *To hear and act on reports of the Town Officers.*

Selectboard: Chair Benson began by recognizing people in the Armed Forces, persons who served in a state or regional organization, local departments such as the Fire Department, and people who have volunteered their time to serve on boards, commissions, and committees. A special thank you went to those persons.

Chair Benson mentioned the damages to the Brookfield Center Cemetery which were the result of an accident. He advised that the responsible individual's insurance company has paid for those damages and that repairs will be made this spring.

Chair Benson noted that the July 2023 storm event was the real story in that numerous roads were lost, over 70 places with significant damages were reported making areas completely impassable, and stranded people. The Town has been working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) ever since that time with damages totaling over a half million. The Town has recently been assigned a new person from FEMA and monies are expected soon. He explained that the Town will receive 75 percent of cost, the maximum allowed, if approved based on the damage assessments. The second part of the program is called mitigation which is designed to make improvements to minimize or reduce damages should a similar storm event occur. There are eight (8) problem culverts that will be submitted for mitigation. If they are all approved, it would total just under four (4) million for design, improvements, and construction. The Town is responsible for up to 28 percent of the costs depending on which program is applicable.

Chair Benson reported that the United States President also approved monies to assist Orange County due to the storms that occurred in December of 2023. The Town will be assessing those damages and applying for additional FEMA grants as appropriate.

Chair Benson reported that the Town garage project was placed on hold due to the flooding issues which created considerable activity at the garage site. They decided it best to wait until this spring to begin construction. They just received approval from the Vermont State Fire Marshall so they are all set to proceed.

Chair Benson reported that the Town has also applied for an energy grant that is available to municipalities. To qualify the Town must go through an audit process for which it has been approved. The audit is 100 percent paid for by the state program. He noted that there is an audit currently in place for the Town Office and Library. The Town Office received some sprucing up with fresh paint. The roof will be completed in the spring.

Chair Benson mentioned the antenna placed on the shed here at the school. The two repeaters were purchased and installed to improve radio communications and are now fully operational. The project was completed last year and although it did not eliminate every dead zone, communications have improved.

Chair Benson reported on the struggles with the Town's relationship with the Orange County Sheriff's Department. He advised that Sheriffs are still patrolling into Brookfield some but they are looking at alternatives. The Town's communications with the state police have been unsuccessful because their numbers are down and they do not have the capacity to help. He noted that the state police will respond in an emergency but they are not policing the Town on a regular basis. The Town is continuing to explore options around us and hope for a good solution.

Chair Benson noted that the last item on which to report is the resignation of Selectboard Member Betty Lord. He thanked her for her service and welcomed her southern humor!

Public Safety Advisory Committee: Lewis Stowell reported that they are working with the Orange County Sheriff's Department in hopes of having a contract but are waiting to see what happens with the budget. He noted that they observe many people walking in the fog, snow storms or other poor weather conditions who are wearing dark clothing. He advised that they want to make people more aware of the problem and efforts to make pedestrians more visible by encouraging them to wear reflective vests.

Mike Rutkovsky added that he also notices people walking dressed all in black and that over the last three years they have passed out vests to make them more aware and much more visible to traffic. Their Committee is looking for \$200 from the Town to purchase more vests.

Lori Churchill asked if pedestrians were also advised on which side of the road they should walk. In Response Mr. Rutkovsky said "yes they do," noting that some responses were good and some not so favorable based on their recommendations.

The 2023 Town Report includes written reports from all boards, commissions, and committees.

- To see if the Town will authorize the Selectboard to borrow money in anticipation of revenues.*

Mr. Stowell made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stoddard, to open discussion on this Article.

Chair Benson advised that since the Town moved to collecting tax revenues twice a year, the Town has not had to borrow monies, however having the ability to do so will safeguard the Town in the event it is needed. The question was called and the motion carried.

- To see if the Town will vote to have all taxes paid into the Treasury as provided by law in two installments, and if so, to set the dates.*

Moderator Wight advised that the proposed due dates for property tax payments are Saturday, November 2, 2024, and May 3, 2025.

Ray Mayer made a motion, seconded by Kym Anderson, to authorize taxes to be paid in two installments on November 2, 2024 and on May 3, 2025. The question was called and the motion carried.

- To see if the Town will approve the change of the Town Treasurer position from an elected position to a Selectboard appointed position starting the first Tuesday of March 2025.*

Mr. Stowell made the motion, seconded by Marylou Maeder, to open discussion on this Article.

Chair Benson advised that the reason this matter was put forward to the voters is that the treasurer's position is a very important position which requires the individual to have an accounting background who understands tax law, insurances, employee regulations, benefits and more. He added that the Selectboard relies heavily on the person in that position. They have been lucky over the years but that has not always been the case. The Selectboard's intent is to solicit someone who can perform the duties and who will stay in the position for a while for consistency. The treasurer's role is a very important and complex position and the Selectboard wants to move the position from elected to an appointed position by the Selectboard.

Tom Garbitelli advised that he is not in favor of this change. Although he understands the difficulty, this role concerns the Town's money, tax payers' money. He believes that the ability to find and appoint a qualified person is already in place with the assistant treasurer position. He feels that the Town's people should have a say in who that person is and want someone they can trust. If the person in that role is not doing well, he or she should step down. He added that there are processes in place for transfer of power when needed. There is no manual that shows all the intricacies of running a town. The Town should create a process or manual to allow someone to jump into the job. He feels that the Town treasurer's position should stay voted in by the People of Brookfield.

G. Jack Zebora advised he is also against allowing the Selectboard to appoint the treasurer. He agrees with the points mentioned above but feels that the Town should keep the right to vote in the treasurer which it has done for 200 years. He added that it is our vote and we should keep it.

Chair Benson explained that as far as the spending of our money, the treasurer has no authority to spend the Town's money. The treasurer implements the mechanisms for revenues and expenditures to ensure those funds end up in the correct field or account, and tracks that data.

Amy Ingrassia advised that she is currently the appointed treasurer and revealed that it was a difficult year, due in part because she had no training. She explained that Teresa Godfrey trained the person who was elected as treasurer last year but resigned soon after. She therefore missed out on the specific training. That said, she is also against appointment versus election of the treasurer and feels that the Town's people should choose. She agrees it would be better to have documented procedures in a manual and that she will work hard to get procedures in place for the next treasurer.

Chair Benson again mentioned the complexities of this role which include knowledge of state and federal regulations, insurances, benefits, and so forth. The treasurer must stay abreast of all those rules for employees and must have knowledge of basic accounting and applicable software programs. He added that it is not as simple as a checklist to follow.

Betty Lord mentioned Mr. Zebora's comment about 200 years noting that many things have changed over the years. She supports giving your vote to the Selectboard to learn a task and to make good choices for the Town. She feels that the Selectboard should have the ability to hire someone with the appropriate knowledge and experience. She reiterated earlier comments that the treasurer's position is not a popularity contest. During the application and interview process, the Selectboard could find someone who has the qualifications to do the job and is best for the Town.

Erik Nielson commented on the need for training and agreed that people do not run for treasurer due to its popularity. He believes people run for the position who wish to serve and would be willing to get the necessary training. Processes must be in place to allow that person to get training.

Dan O'Brien advised that finances and accounting is a profession and that the Town's budget is bigger than ever. It is a very important job and he trusts the elected Selectboard to find that person.

Dan Childs advised that he serves as treasurer of several organizations and agrees that a professional should serve in that role. The one that keeps him up at night is EC Fiber due the large amount of funds and its complexities. He feels that a professional should be in the treasurer's position. He agreed that running a town is not like it was 200 years ago, and wants someone who knows how to get it done right, which is unlikely via on-the-job training. He noted that his role as treasurer of various organizations consumes a lot of his time and involves many forms. It is hard work and needs someone who is a professional.

Mr. Garbitelli believes that we are smart enough to have an option and does not want to destroy that right because it is hard. The Town could also create a position that is protected by the Selectboard to get someone qualified. He noted that many towns want to get rid of elected positions but feels that it does not need to be eliminated immediately when a better solution may be out there. Mr. Garbitelli added that he does trust the Selectboard but would rather see the position filled by the People of Brookfield.

Nancy Doda suggested a two-step process wherein the Selectboard chooses the candidates and the Town's people vote on the individual person to serve in that role.

Betty Lord confirmed that this is an issue for several towns to ensure they have someone qualified for the position.

Ms. Ingrassia advised that the main reason for towns going to appointed positions is that people are not running for those positions. She complimented Ms. Godfrey on her success but noted that the procedures were not documented.

Perry Kacik acknowledged that the expansion of the Selectboard members a couple of years ago was a great success. Where we, the Town's people, put thinking around our leadership proved to be good decision.

Jon Binhammer asked the Moderator to call the question to see if the town treasurer will be elected by the voters or appointed by the Selectboard. Motion carried with no further discussion on the matter.

The question was called resulting in the first vote via voice, yeas or nays, too close to call. Persons standing in favor of the change resulted in 81 votes, with 25 persons standing opposed. Motion carried.

6. *To see if the Town will approve the change of the 1st Constable's position from a one-year term to a two-year term starting in 2024.*

Mr. Stowell made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stoddard, to open discussion on this Article.

Constable Dan Mason explained that this change is essentially administrative with little if any effect on the Town.

The question was called and the motion carried.

7. *To see if the Town will authorize adding \$200 to the budget for the Public Safety Advisory Committee.*

Mr. Stowell made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stoddard, to open discussion on this Article.

Mr. Stowell reiterated their concerns for the safety of pedestrians wearing dark clothing who are not as visible as they need to be when walking. Their Committee is asking for \$200 to purchase reflective vests that will be distributed to pedestrians making them more visible to traffic in an effort to reduce the risk of accidents involving pedestrians.

The question was called and the motion carried.

8. *To see if the Town will authorize an increase from \$500 to \$1500 for the Randolph Area Food Shelf.*

Linda Garrett made a motion, seconded by Marie Dunwoody, to open discussion on this Article.

Chair Benson explained how donations from the Town work. The Town has traditionally put a donation request on the Warning and the group makes its pitch. If approved, going forward the group can request a donation for the same amount and it is typically added into the budget. The Selectboard has the right to question the request. In this situation, the Randolph Area Food Shelf asked for a substantial increase, thus it was not just added to the budget. The donation requested of \$1,500 was added to the Warning for consideration by the voters.

Ms. Garrett confirmed that this group usually asks for \$500 but due to increased costs of groceries and more people being served, the increase to \$1,500 is needed. She noted that they have seen an 80 percent increase in the number of people served. She explained that the 16 families mentioned being served in the Town's report from Brookfield is misleading because it only counts regulars. They also offer special meals during Thanksgiving and other holidays.

Mr. Garbitelli was unaware that the Town of Brookfield benefited from this service.

Ms. Garrett advised that advertisements are placed in the *Randolph Harold* and on *Front Porch Forum*.

Dennis Larocque agreed that the food shelf is jammed and that a lot of people are served by it. Linda Runnion also agreed and stressed the need for this service.

The question was called to raise the donation to the Randolph Area Food Shelf from \$500 to \$1500 and the motion carried.

9. *To approve a 12-month budget for the financial year of July 1, 2024 to June 30, 2025 to meet the expenses and liabilities of the Town **General Fund** and to authorize the Selectboard to set a tax rate sufficient to provide the same.*

Ms. Runnion made a motion, seconded by Mr. Mayer, to open discussion on this Article.

Chair Benson reported that the current General Fund budget is \$589,881.

Gary Lord advised that the needed increase in donation from the Town to the Randolph Senior Center was inadvertently left out of the budget, thus they are making their request in open meeting.

Lois Wakefield indicated that she is on the Board of Directors for the Randolph Senior Center and noted the significant increase in costs making it difficult for seniors. The organization's budget is \$300,000. They rely on volunteers and donations and must raise \$95,000. She added that Meals on Wheels could be provided by the organization with proper funding. They are looking for another \$1000 from the Town of Brookfield to help reach that goal.

Moderator Wight advised that a formal motion is required to amend the budget.

Mr. Stoddard made the motion, seconded by Holly Dustin, to amend the General Fund budget.

Chair Benson advised that the group is currently budgeted for \$2100, thus an increase of \$900 is the amount needed to get to their budget.

Ms. Dustin made a motion, seconded by Ms. Ingrassia, for a friendly amendment to the original motion, to add an extra \$900 to the General Fund budget. The question was called and the motion carried.

Mr. Zebora questioned whether the Town was receiving services from the Tri Valley Transportation (former Stagecoach), and whether to continue with the \$1100 donation. He advised that the bus route does not go through Brookfield and opined that the Town is not getting served as they indicate. He contacted the group and learned that there was a charge for services. He feels that contributions to this group should be removed from the budget.

Moderator Wight advised that such a change requires an amendment to the budget.

Laura Rochat mentioned people who do benefit from that service which includes transport to and from doctor's appointments and to the hospital.

Ms. Anderson advised she works with Tri Valley Transportation and confirmed that there are a lot of people who need that service. She noted that the service does not just apply to the elderly but also pertains to people who cannot drive if they lost their driver's license. Others chimed in for their support.

The question was called to amend the budget to remove \$1100 for Tri Valley Transportation and the motion failed.

The result of the approved amendments raises the General Fund budget from \$589,881 (plus \$2100) to \$591,981. The question was called on the original motion and the motion carried.

10. *To see if the Town will authorize the Selectboard to pay a bonus of \$500 each to the three Road Crew Members (Tim, Ritchie and Rob) as appreciation for their efforts in the repair of our roadways during and following the July storm.*

Mr. Nielson made a motion, seconded by Mr. Smith, to open discussion on this Article.

Chair Benson explained that they are proposing a \$500 bonus to each road crew member because they worked straight out during the July storm event with the flooding. They were out monitoring and dealing with the situation for 24 hours straight to ensure people could get out safely. They then worked all summer to get the roads back in shape and want the community to show its appreciation. He also wants to recognize the efforts by the Fire Department during this event. Applause.

Mr. Kacik also appreciates their efforts during the five mud seasons we have been through!! He acknowledged that the road crew does an amazing job.

The question was called to add \$1500 to the Highway Fund budget to give \$500 bonuses to three people in appreciation for their extra efforts and the motion carried.

11. *To see if the Town will authorize the Selectboard to purchase a new Town Dump Truck. The cost not to exceed \$260,000 and to be financed over three-year period starting in 2024.*

Mr. Mayer made a motion, seconded by Tim Schroeder, to open discussion on this Article.

In response to questions from persons in the audience, Chair Benson advised that this will replace one truck and that the price mentioned includes the trade-in value of the current truck. He explained that they have been on a nine-year replacement cycle however manufacturers recommend upgrading every seven years. He advised that they are looking into upgrading sooner to see what it looks like. The trucks take a beating over the backroads. Chair Benson

noted that at one point, all three trucks were down and help was received by neighboring towns. He confirmed that after nine years, the trucks are tired and need to be replaced.

Emily Warner advised that her husband is a mechanic at 802 Subaru. That company did research into the county and decided to reduce their warranties because the vehicles will not last in this area.

Ms. Dustin asked to call the question and the motion passed.

The question was called on the original motion to purchase a new dump truck and the motion carried.

12. *To approve a 12-month budget for the financial year of July 1, 2024 to June 30, 2025 to meet the expenses and liabilities of the Town **Highway Fund** and to authorize the Selectboard to set a tax rate sufficient to provide the same.*

Ms. Ingrassia made a motion, seconded by Mr. Anderson, to open discussion on this Article.

Billi Gosh reported that she has had two flat tires due to the pointed, sharp edges on the stone being used. She advised that others have had the same problem and asked if there was any solution.

Chair Benson confirmed that others have also had the same problem. They are unable to obtain bank run (river) gravel so they must rely on what is processed out of the crusher that leaves sharp edges. They have tried to minimize the occurrence by adding a roller on the back of the grader which compacts the stone into the mud. There have been multiple mud seasons and then it freezes. In addition, the gravel pits have run out of stock so they are stuck with processed material. The flooding amplified that issue requiring hauling more material to build some of the roads. Chair Benson explained the difficulty in trying to mix the materials and additional costs that would be incurred.

The question was called to approve the Highway Fund budget as amended and the motion carried. The result of the amendment increased the budget from \$1,016, 207 (plus \$1500) to \$1,017, 707.

13. *To transact any other proper business.*

Mark MacDonald noted that the road conditions are a sign of the changing climate which will not go away. He joked about his recovery from a stroke and recognized the challenges due to the changing of districts. He advised he would be happy to speak with people if they have questions.

Mr. Kacik presented raffle tickets for the Ice-Out event for “*Dunkin.*” He indicated the price of tickets at \$2 and recommended purchasing three for \$5. He advised that this benefits the Brookfield Historical Society. He also advised that the Marvin Newton House is the Town’s Museum which has been refreshed with new paint and other improvements at considerable costs.

Ms. Anderson indicated that she was thrilled that so many people were present and was grateful for that. She noted that she attended a legislative breakfast and felt that every legislature present had investigated all options available.

Mr. Boggs advised he has been thinking about roads and noted that he previously ran for a town position with his proposal based on roads. He does not believe that things have changed since he talked about it. He recommended documenting the worst places, some worse than others. He compared roads maintained by the state versus those maintained by the town, the difference boiling down to finances. The state ensures a good base under the road, makes sure it drains properly, and so on. He proposes to make it a broad problem and reapportion it so the expenses are shared. He feels it would improve the roads and that it should be a discussion topic. He recommends a long-term plan for the roads.

There being no further business, Mr. Stowell made a motion, seconded by Ms. Gosh, to adjourn the meeting at 11:44. The question was called and the motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

By Carol Monness, Town Clerk and
Carla Preston, Recording Secretary