

TOWN OF BENNINGTON

BOARD OF SELECTMEN

Minutes of the Meeting – January 23, 2021

Selectmen James Cleary, David Foster, and David Hardwick, Sr. were present as well as Town Administrator Kristie LaPlante. The meeting was called to order at 9:05 a.m.

The Selectmen called a special meeting to finalize the 2021 Budget and Warrant.

The Town Administrator shared an email received from a resident suggesting Town employees contribute 6-10% towards their health insurance premium. The Selectmen declined to make a change for the 2021 Budget and agreed the topic should be reviewed prior to the next budget cycle.

At the January 13, 2021 Budget Hearing, the Selectmen presented all known or anticipated expenditures and revenue. The Selectmen again reviewed the proposed 2021 Operating Budget in the amount of \$1,790,488 and Default Budget in the amount of \$1,784,356 and voted to approve each as drafted and presented at the Budget Hearing.

The Selectmen discussed the Fire Department's delayed submission of their Warrant Article for a Cardiac Monitor. Because the topic was included in the Budget Hearing as a potential Warrant Article with a \$1 place holder, the Selectmen can legally proceed with including it in the 2021 Warrant.

The Selectmen reviewed two quotes from Zoll Medical Corporation for an X Series Cardiac Monitor/Defibrillator – one quote for a new model (\$39,394.49) and one quote for a refurbished model (\$31,711.60). After some discussion, the Selectmen voted to proceed a Warrant Article request for a Cardiac Monitor not to exceed \$32,000. The Town Administrator explained the process that will take place – a Warrant Article requesting \$1 for a Fire Department Cardiac Monitor will appear on the Warrant until Deliberative Session. At Deliberative Session, the Selectmen can make a motion to amend the Warrant Article from \$1 to \$32,000. If the amendment is approved at Deliberative Session, the amended Warrant Article will then appear on the March 9, 2021 ballot.

The Selectmen reviewed the proposed 2021 Warrant as drafted. Motion was made, seconded, and voted to approve the Warrant as drafted. The Selectmen will be required to stop by the Town Office on January 25th to sign the 2021 Budget, 2021 Default Budget, and 2021 Warrant for proper posting.

The Selectmen discussed two requests from residents to hold Deliberative Session virtually due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Town Administrator explained that HB1129 allows towns to hold their Deliberative Session virtually during the Pandemic. In order to hold a virtual Deliberative Session, the Town would be required to mail notice to every registered voter of the dates/time/format of Deliberative Session and designated methods to receive feedback. At the first virtual session, the Selectmen would review and discuss the Warrant. The Selectmen would then adjourn the meeting to allow a few days for feedback from virtual attendees via their designated method. At the second virtual session, the Selectmen would review feedback received and either accept or deny requested changes. The irony behind HB1129 for SB2 communities is that it allows greater access to the process through a listen-only platform but restricts the ability for voters to actively participate. In reviewing those restrictions, the Selectmen voted to meet in person for Deliberative Session at Pierce School.

The Selectmen continued discussion of the financial impact of the Conval Budget as presented at their January 12, 2021 Budget Hearing:

- If the Operating Budget is approved by District voters, towns/taxpayers will see an estimated 8.42% increase in their assessments. For Bennington taxpayers, this would increase the Conval portion of the tax rate by \$1.34/\$1,000 (from \$15.52 to \$16.86).
 - Included in the proposed Operating Budget are \$1.35 million in staffing additions. The first year of wages/benefits can be offset by use of certain trust funds, however, those costs would not be offset and would become part of the full Operating Budget for year two and beyond.
- If the Operating Budget is denied by District voters and the District operates in a Default budget, towns/taxpayers will see an estimated 6.67% increase in their assessments. For Bennington taxpayers, this would increase the Conval portion of the tax rate by \$1.04/\$1,000 (from \$15.52 to \$16.56).
- If the Collective Bargaining Agreement and all Warrant Articles are approved, that will add an estimated 5.8% increase *on top of* the increases estimated above.

The Selectmen conceptually discussed what the process would be to leave the District. Bennington taxpayers simply cannot stomach upwards of 14.22% in tax rate increases for Conval alone. Similarly, the Selectmen are put in a position to second guess the true needs of the Town in the shadow of Conval's budget.

The Selectmen discussed reopening Town Hall now that the majority of safety improvements have been completed. The Town Administrator reported that the Town's insurance provider recommends input from the Town's Joint Loss Management Committee as part of the decision to reopen. A Joint Loss Management Committee meeting will be scheduled in the coming weeks; the Selectmen will hear any concerns from the Committee before a reopening date is scheduled.

Emergency Management Director Keith Nason met with the Selectmen to discuss a recent COVID-19 positive case at Town Hall that closed the Administrative Offices while staff were required to quarantine. Selectmen Cleary made a motion to enter in to Non-Public Session at 9:21 a.m., seconded by Selectman David Hardwick. All were in favor and voted to enter in to Non-Public Session. Present were Emergency Management Director Keith Nason, Town Administrator Kristie LaPlante, and the Selectmen. Keith shared steps taken with contact tracing, employee exposures and quarantine, and notice sent to employees and Department Heads who were not exposed. Motion was made at 9:45 a.m. to exit Non-Public Session; all were in favor. Town Administrator Kristie LaPlante reported that the interoffice exposure happened during a staff meeting when employees were within 6' proximity for more than 35 minutes. If not for that meeting, other staff members would likely not have been exposed and the Administrative Offices likely would not have had to close.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:55 a.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Kristie LaPlante
Town Administrator