

MEETING MINUTES

Town of Heath
SELECT BOARD
Jacobs Road Municipal Center
Tuesday, April 2, 2024

Called to Order at 6:00 p.m. With Robyn Provost-Carlson, Susan Lively, Elissa Viarengo and Hilma Sumner, Town Coordinator.

Others in Attendance: See attendance sheet.

The meeting was recorded.

Review Agenda: Added: ATM Bake Sale, Coalition for Rural Community Sustainability

Review Minutes: *On a motion by Susan Lively and seconded by Elissa Viarengo, the Select Board unanimously voted to approve the minutes of March 26, 2024, as presented.*

Annual Town Meeting Bake Sale: The Council on Aging and Senior Program Coordinator have asked that they be allowed to resume the past custom of offering snacks and morning beverages during the Annual Town Meeting. These items are offered on a donation basis. *On a motion by Susan Lively and seconded by Elissa Viarengo, the Select Board unanimously voted to approve the offering of food and beverage during the Annual Town Meeting.*

Representative Natalie Blais: Representative Blais was present for about an hour during the meeting to speak with the Select Board, Finance Committee, and residents about concerns in the community. Rep. Blais stated that she wants towns in her district to know that she is working on issues important to them. She makes it a practice to visit each of the 17 towns in her district at least once a year.

When she asked about concerns that the Town considered of high priority there were several areas that were discussed. The first concern was the position that has been taken that ambulance services are not seen as essential and, because of that, there is little third-party reimbursement even though the cost is approximately \$2,400 per run. Because of fund shortage, towns are being asked to contribute to local ambulance service. For FY 2025, the Town is being asked to pay an assessment that helps cover the expense of continued operation. It is likely that it will cost Heath \$22,000 for the upcoming year.

Another topic discussed was the need for more grant funding that would help fund pressing building needs: a new salt shed and a new fire station. Due to the lack of adequate storage, the Fire Department brush truck needs a new pump which is an unanticipated expense. The salt shed construction is estimated at \$350,000 while a fire garage sufficient to meet the Town's needs is estimated to be at least \$2 million.

Officials explained that Heath will have an approximate budget of \$2.7 million of which educational expenses will total approximately \$1.1 million. In addition, there are capital needs for each of the Town's buildings as well as many infrastructure needs. Rep. Blais commented that there is the Rural Aid for Education bill before the legislature. Five years ago, the bill contained \$1.5 million in assistance and the FY 2025 proposal is to provide \$15 million in aid.

There is a new chairperson of the Education Committee that Rep. Blais intends to bring out to Western Massachusetts to visit some of the rural schools.

Resident Devon Clark expressed her thanks for coming to Heath and for bringing others to see the district so they may see what rural conditions are in the western end of the state. Others also expressed supported concern for the areas mentioned by the Town officials.

Rep. Blais was asked about the status of developing an east-west commuter rail for the northern branch of the state. There are two alternatives being studied and a recommendation will be made at the end of the feasibility study. More information can be found on a website about the northern tier project.

The Select Board mentioned that there are the same standards and requirements for Heath and other small towns that there are for large cities, and some are impossible to meet due to lack of population or financial means. Heath struggles to maintain salary increases for its employees to the level of a living wage. The Select Board needs to recognize the dedication of the people who work for the Town. The struggle in determining whether to give adequate raises for FY 2025 amounts to approximately \$17,000.

FY 2025 Budget Planning: The meeting then turned its attention to discussion of the FY 2025 budget planning with Finance Committee members Tom Lively, Will Emmet, Ned Wolf, and Bob McGahan present.

Recommendations formulated by the Finance Committee during their previous two meetings included:

- Increased wages for highway employees and the Town Clerk
- Funding the ambulance assessment at the flat rate of \$22,000.
- Funding the accountant software through a combination of Free Cash and the Accountant Software Stabilization account balance
- Using money from the Vehicle Stabilization account to purchase a used highway truck
- Purchasing a leaf blower and storage container with a transfer from Free Cash
- Requesting more information regarding repair/replacement of a roadside mower
- Funding the construction of a new salt shed with \$103,000 from ARPA funds, \$100,000 from Free Cash, and borrowing \$200,000.

Discussion included information about options for a roadside mower. It was agreed that the Town should either purchase a new roadside mower or purchase a used, larger tractor with mower. The Highway Superintendent has commented that the current tractor is too small to do a proficient job with the current mower. Will Emmet is going to discuss the options further with the Superintendent.

Hilma will consult with the Accountant about the purchase of new software and what the ideal timing would be to begin the transition from the current software. Besides capital purchases of the Highway Department and the Accountant software, other financial costs include the ambulance assessment, paying off the tractor loan, the second half of the FY 2022 MTRSD assessment error, and the Town's share of the late bus expense. The Treasurer will be asked for a list of loan payments including the balance of each, number of remaining years, and whether there is a penalty for prepayment.

Salary proposals were studied with three different scenarios presented. Robyn stated that she had not been involved in the salary discussion for highway personnel, but the suggested numbers were reported to her following last week's meeting. The first scenario was salary amounts if all employees were given only the 3.2 percent COLA. The second scenario adjusted all position salaries that were still below the mid-range for the job classification step. The third scenario gave adjustments that were more equitable in portion to each wage. The difference in cost between the first and third scenarios amounted to \$18,694.

The proposed hours of the Office Assistant position will be decreased from ten hours to six hours. Information will be compiled regarding each employee's years of total service in the Town and years in the current position. The Accountant will be consulted about remaining balances listed in some of the Other Funds accounts.

MTRSD Agreement Articles: Hilma reported that there had been no communication from the school district officials regarding the requested information or the possibility of having a discussion meeting. Budge will be contacted regarding his position and thoughts on bringing the proposed changes to the voters at this time.

Community Hall Windows Fundraising: The total amount received in donations to date is: \$10,677.34.

Community Hall/Sawyer Hall Mold Remediation: The Building Maintenance Coordinator has almost completed painting in Community Hall. He will be contacting the plumber to reinstall fixtures. A contractor has measured the stage-area ceiling area for replacement. Matching tiles are no longer available so similar tiles will be looked for. Sawyer Hall still needs to be painted.

Annual Town Report Dedication: Passed over.

Coalition for Rural Community Sustainability: The Board reviewed an invitation from Larry Langford, a member of the Buckland Finance Committee who would like to form a group that would immediately focus on fiscal sustainability of the school district. Long-term goals include sustainability of rural communities in the area. Sue volunteered to attend the initial meeting which is scheduled for tomorrow.

Mail: None.

Next Meetings: Tuesday, April 9th, 6:00 p.m. Budget planning with Finance Committee.

9:45 p.m. *On a motion by Susan Lively and seconded by Elissa Viarengo, the Select Board unanimously voted to adjourn the meeting.*

Respectfully submitted,

Hilma A. Sumner
Town Coordinator