

TOWN OF HIGHGATE

Selectboard Special Mtg.

April 8, 2015 @ 6pm

Approved Minutes

NOTE: All actions taken are unanimous unless otherwise stated.

A. Call to Order

Present were: Jeff Towle, Chris Yates, Diana O'Hara, Paulette Tatro, Heidi Britch-Valenta, Tom Racine, St. Albans Police Chief – Gary Taylor and St. Albans Police Lieutenant – Judy Dunn. *Absent – Randy Connelly.*

Jeff opened the meeting @ 6pm and handed it off to Chris Yates.

B. Discuss dispatching services with St. Albans Police Chief, Gary Taylor

We have seen dispatching fees grow and we are trying to get a hold on where it is coming from, and what influences we have on it, if any. Our two uses are ambulatory services and fire protection, for budgeting we are trying to find out which is which. Chief Taylor painted a picture about dispatch, he took over in 2005. They dispatch for a number of communities and there was not much reasoning behind how dispatching fees were formulated. He was asked to evaluate if they should be in the dispatching business and if so, what they can do to make it work. Dispatch used to be part of the police department budget. The first thing he was did was looked at usage. St. Albans City uses 60% and 40% by the rest of Franklin County. Second, they needed to account for a formula and arrive at a fee. Everybody was basically getting a free ride and city taxpayers were subsidizing dispatching services. They came to a 60/40 conclusion. 60% St. Albans City and 40% split with the remainder of the county. It can be done on a per capita basis or how Lamoille County does it, 50% based on grand list and 50% per capita. Stowe pays Lamoille \$259,000 for dispatching, Wolcott pays \$87,000. Wolcott has no police department, they contract with sheriff. This year Cambridge will be paying \$93,000 for dispatching. Franklin County is not wealthy. And St. Albans City should not be painted as wealthy either, so they went with the per capita rate. They take their budget, then go 60/40, and based on the latest census they go by per capita. For example, Franklin has a fire department. Georgia has rescue, fire, and a fast squad, which is an advanced team that usually is associated with ambulance services. They are certified EMS personnel who respond in their own vehicles or in fire trucks. The town of St. Albans is in the same situation. Is it absolutely fair to a community that only has a fire department, probably not. The other side is we don't have a CEO that manages a dispatch center, it's the police chief. The last thing he wants to do is be in a situation to be a CEO for a dispatch center. There is no full time bookkeeper either at dispatch. It is easier to bill a community and let the town figure out how that breaks down. This is Chief Taylor's 10th year, and they have gradually brought each town up to the amount they should have been paying all along, which meant substantial increases. On the heels of that, the employees are union employees and negotiated a new contract, and health care sky rocketed and workman's comp also contributed to costs rising. All of these things contributed to large incremental increases between 2007-2011. Jeff asked what year MVR went from volunteer to paid employees. Maybe 3-4 years ago, that is when the town saw a big increase also. Last year, in Highgate, there were 244 rescue calls and 66 fire calls. They compare prices with others, such as Hartford, Lamoille County and Shelburne. He has good information on all of them and what they get. St. Albans is the lowest, and feel their formula is the most fair. Chief Taylor thought that after 9/11 they would be much better served by improving communications vs. buying a lot of new toys. Topography is terrible here. Lt. Dunn said they received a grant to put all agencies on one frequency for dispatch, which is a great system. They are still working through changing the license over for mutual aid. She is hopeful licensing will be complete this spring. It has been a struggle. Chris asked, if there is a site picked in Highgate for additional

communications equipment. They plan to add another base and antennae here at the municipal building. Lt. Dunn asked about the cell tower. We have a tower coming at the arena site with SBA communications. In our talks with them, we secured 96' for communications, that is where the town needs to talk to dispatch to improve communications and perhaps this would be a cheap place for them to locate. At 96' that should improve more than just Highgate. Taylor said 96' is an excellent height for them and they are interested in pursuing this more. There are 8 PSAPs (Public Safety Answering Points) in the state (4 municipal, 4 state), some of which may be closed and relocated. Taylor signed a contract guaranteeing that there will be two 911 call takers in the dispatch center 24/7 and 365. A dispatcher in St. Albans costs \$68,000-\$72,000 per year with benefits. We can pay either per call or per seat. The decision was made that state police would be host to 18 seats, not 18 dispatchers. All of us together are paying the costs to cover dispatchers. Chief Taylor visited with our Lt. Governor and talked about 911 issues. People don't know the difference between 911 call taking and dispatching. 911 dispatching is all about emergency services and 911 call taking is about the customer. The per seat thing is confusing to the public and legislators. When state police close those two dispatch centers, those calls will get pushed to St. Albans. The phone can only ring twice before it comes to a live operator. The system hunts for a seat that is available to take the call. There were 116,000 calls last year in St. Albans, 24,000 were 911 calls and the rest were broken up between police, fire, follow up and information calls. That puts us far above the other centers. Hartford handles 8,000 911 calls, Lamoille handles 13,000 911 calls and Shelburne handles 14,000 911 calls annually. When the legislature decided to keep the 2 PSAPs open they came up with a different plan, they wanted the commissioner to go to the communities and see if they would be willing to pay for it, like some already do. If they were, that would be collected by the side judges in the county, which is a horrible idea, because we don't have any input in the county tax rate. It costs what it costs. We are all going through tough economic times. We have had substantial increases getting everybody where they should be. Chief Taylor said they are negotiating another union contract. To the best of his knowledge, there is no reason for us to have any substantial increases. Paulette asked what makes up the union contract. Everyone below the rank of Lieutenant is in the union. Through collective bargaining they arrive at raises, step plans and benefits. They can bill the town separately if that works for us. The catch is, they can't predict how many calls they will have next year, so it would be last year's numbers to project next year's budget. There is a lot of room for fluctuation on the rescue side. The number of fire calls is fairly consistent, big changes are with rescue numbers. Chris asked if there is any advantage to billing separately. Tom noted that the fire department has been paying slightly more, but it's fairly consistent. Tom said we share services with Swanton and they provide a budget which is contractual in our general fund which includes dispatching fees. It is not easy to follow and not everybody is on the same page as to how the figures are driven. What we are hoping for is to gain some clarification. We initiated a discussion with MVR this last budget cycle. Tom added that we are hopeful to eliminate the circular billing fees. If it is easier to bill the town and have the town bill MVR, that is fine. Chris clarified, on the per capita figure, the 60% comes out first - yes. Paulette also asked for some clarification on that same topic. Jeff asked what happens if they pick up an additional stakeholder (customer). This year they have had substantial conversations about looking at the formula to see how it can be tweaked. Milton has asked to be provided with some numbers. The commissioner of public safety will confirm, when the caller calls and says "my house is on fire", they stay on the line with the caller until help arrives and they stay with the fire department or other emergency responder until they are back in the station and ready to go again. They own the call from the time it comes in and until it is complete. Jeff asked who dispatches for the FCSO. Lamoille County does it 100%, and Chief Taylor explained the history behind that decision. Paulette asked how covering in Grand Isle County does not affect what we pay. Grand Isle pays a separate fee, more than we do, and they pay a portion of a dispatcher and a higher rate. When they took on dispatching for them they actually page them / text message them. They are now dispatching them on VHF. What they were asking for was more work, which was separate from the work already being done in Franklin County. Last year's bill for them was \$124,000. Paulette asked about retention of employees. Dispatching is tough, and the hours stink. Dispatching traditionally attracts young people and is still fairly dominated by females. Part time staff comes and goes pretty quickly. Everyone is on 8 hour days. They have entertained the idea of 12 hour days, but are they are as good the

last three hours as the first nine? Chief Taylor has been in law enforcement 38 years. It is common for people to stay over their shift if they are in the middle of a call. There are 2-5 people in the dispatch center at all times. If there is a major incident going on in a town, the extra personnel can be utilized by that town for their issue at that time. It is rare that multiple major incidents are going on in different towns at one time. 5-7 years is usually the maximum life span of new technology. Paulette asked if he knew how much was in the fund balance for technology now. Taylor suspects the answer is \$0.00. Paulette also asked about texting to 911, not all communities have cell coverage, such as the village of Franklin. A new cell tower was just installed in St. Albans, hopefully that will improve things. Tom asked if there is a way to provide info for us to understand what the cost structure is and how they come up with the 60/40 split. If you look at the budget on their website, under essential dispatch, you will see all the factors that are taken into account. The combination of call volume and all these factors determines the numbers. They are the only center in VT that has ever evacuated the center and set up outside of that site. They are 79' from a major rail corridor in St. Albans. Chris asked if there is any infrastructure here in Highgate, no just our radios. Orleans County is in the worst shape, due to the topography. Heidi asked what municipalities can do to help with the expenses we incur. Chief Taylor can't think of anything off the top of his head, the problem is, even if you add more communication groups, there will be costs. There are 32 firefighters in St. Albans City, the most they have ever had. It is more expensive to buy portable radios for all those people. Growing bigger does not necessarily make you more efficient or economical. They could pick up Milton and be alright. Milton would pay on a different system and different fee, similar to that of Grand Isle County. The reason cops and fireman do what they do, is because other cops and fireman will be there to support them. He can't take a chance of sending a police officer to a community if he does not know they have support if they get in trouble. Heidi is still hung up on the towns that don't pay anything. The town of Brandon just stopped paying one day. What happens when they need assistance? In Franklin County, if you decided they just weren't going to pay, they would not dispatch, with this caveat; if somebody needed help, they would get them help. But he would not give them cradle to grave (start to finish) service like everyone else. The town of St. Albans would tell you that they were paying twice until they began to bill separately. The greatest confusion in this mix is that VSP are dispatched differently. When the FCSO proposes to give you a contract, that does not include fire and rescue dispatch, that includes dispatch for FCSO only. Anyone who has a contract with the FCSO is in the same situation that we are. Paulette asked if someone breaks into her house and she calls 911, who will she get and who will come to her house? Chief Taylor agrees, it is confusing, because we contract here with FCSO. If a 911 call comes in and it's a request for police, they are pre-programmed to connect with primary law enforcement agencies and it rolls down from there. It would take 3-5 minutes. Before St. Albans became a regional 911 center, there are some streets in the city where half is in St. Albans City and half in St. Albans Town. If you called from one side it went to St. Albans Police, the other half of the street it went to Williston. With calls to St. Albans Police, there is no lost time because they are the responding agency and familiar with the area. If the call goes to Williston they are not familiar and decisions need to be made, which takes a bit of time. If you are really in a panic that will also add to the time it takes to process the call. The last bank robbery in St. Albans, it had been 7 minutes since the bank robbery occurred. It was not in progress, even though it was called in while in progress. Even 3-5 minutes is a lot of time. The personal connection is also a time saver. When they pulled dispatchers for VSP out of St. Albans and put them in Williston that changed things. Jeff feels that the costs keep rising and we have no control. Negotiations are going on, and we have no input. Chief Taylor noted that they dispatch for 38 entities. There are 10 communities making up the 40% figure. Nobody gets a free ride, public works in St. Albans city has a dispatch fee, and so does water and sewer. The 60/40 is referring to emergency calls, fire and rescue. Jeff appreciates the explanation tonight. Other towns have said to Jeff that they would be interested in getting into the dispatching business because of costs. Tom said the only way for us to be clear is if we understand. The more we understand, the more comfortable we are to share the information. Chief Taylor said that Grand Isle County thought they are paying too much and were going to look around. He asked for them to get back to him with the numbers, which they did, and nobody else could do it cheaper. Chief Taylor will get the board the entire breakout of the 60/40 and compare Hartford and Lamoille County as well. That is good information for us to

have to share with our taxpayers. Chris added that when he needed numbers from MVR he got what he needed, which was helpful. Jeff said he is not aware that we have had representation at dispatch advisory meetings since 2007 and this process has been explained before, but that information has never been shared with the board. The mud puddle just became clearer. It consumes more time to manage the dispatch side of things than it does to manage badges and guns, per Chief Taylor. Milton will pay \$183,000 this year to Colchester for dispatching. If you do the math using our numbers, you start to understand the true costs of dispatching. Chris asked if other towns ask for monthly reports. Chief Taylor will come and talk to boards, but will not do detailed monthly reports for stakeholders. It is too time consuming. Franklin has requested quarterly reporting for numbers, they could do the same for us. Remember, they handled 116,000 calls last year, and he gets to review every one of them. Dispatching is complicated in this state. Heidi asked if our board has a feel for how they are going to handle the billing with MVR. They seem to be as equally in the dark about all of this as we are. MVR participates in all the advisory meetings as well, Leonard Stell knows exactly what goes into all of this, he used to work for Chief Taylor. Tom said there seems to have been some indication that rescue was having some difficulty organizationally. It was very confusing to understand how they are budgeting. They seem to be struggling. The dispatch advisory meetings have been going on since 2006 or 2007 and have since been combined with county fire meetings, and are open to any stakeholders. Dave St. Pierre used to attend for years from MVR. Tammy Rouse is there every time from Highgate. Letters go to municipalities and each town is welcome to attend and send as many reps as they choose. Dick Souza has not been attending lately, as he works nights. Chief Taylor provided his contact information to the board. All of their telephone lines with the exception of one and all the radio traffic is recorded and is on record for years until it records over itself. He gave examples of times that they have had to go back and review the tapes and found errors with dispatching that have sometimes resulted in dispatchers being let go. He also mentioned the dash board cameras and how those are very useful in certain situations as well. There are also 50 cameras in St. Albans City all on public property. There isn't much that goes on in St. Albans City that isn't monitored, including key strokes on computers in the police department. In the future, he even sees firefighters will have cameras on their helmets. There are GPS devices in all city police vehicles that monitor where patrol cars have been. The board thanked Chief Taylor and Lt. Dunn for being here and for all the information and clarity given.

C. Executive Session

Motion by Chris Yates to enter into executive session @ 9:07pm to discuss personnel. Motion seconded by Jeff Towle – **APPROVED.**

Motion by Jeff Towle to exit executive session @9:45pm. Motion was seconded by Paulette Tatro – **APPROVED.**

D. Adjournment

Motion by Jeff Towle to adjourn the meeting at 9:47pm. Motion was seconded by Paulette Tatro – **APPROVED.**

Respectfully submitted by,

_____ Wendi Dusablon, Highgate Town Clerk

Minutes transcribed from the audio recording of this meeting, as I was not personally present. wsd.

Minutes approved by,

_____ Jeff Towle, Chair – Highgate Selectboard