

TOWN OF HIGHGATE SELECTBOARD

Joint Pre-Town Meeting Info Session
with the Highgate Elementary School Board
@ Highgate Elementary School Library

February 19, 2015 @ 7pm

Approved Minutes

NOTE: All actions taken are unanimous unless otherwise stated.

A. Call to Order & Pledge of Allegiance

The meeting was called to order by Jeff Towle, Chair @ 7:04pm, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.

Highgate Selectboard Members- Jeff Towle, Chair; Andy King, Vice- Chair; Chris Yates; Absent – Diana O'Hara & Luke Choiniere

Highgate Elementary School Board Members – Connie Beyor, Chair; David Roddy; Richard Flint; Nola Gilbert; Liza Comiskey

Highgate Office Staff – Wendi Dusablon - Town Clerk; Heidi Britch-Valenta – Town Admin; Tom Racine – Town Treasurer

Highgate Elementary School & FNWSU Staff – Winton Goodrich – FNWSU Superintendent; Marcel Choquette – Highgate Elem. Principal; Lora McAllister – FNWSU Asst. Business Manager

Public / Other – Ben Lowell – Constable; Rick Trombley; Keith Ploof; Stephen Bushey; Richard Noel; Karen Fortin; Karen Gagne-Fortin; Henry Rainville; Pat McGovern; Ty Choiniere; Don Gilbert, Steve Ploof

B. Public Comments

None

C. Zoning Bylaw Public Hearing (#2)

This is the second warned public hearing on the bylaw revision, and this is also the last required one. Rick Trombley thanked the Planning Commission for the work they did and Heidi for keeping them on track, as well as NRPC. It was a long process, but the new bylaws are more uniform and flow easier – it will be better for all. Notable changes to the bylaws include; combined unified development regulations, the high density district is now referred to as the “village district”, updated flood hazard regulations, language has been incorporated regarding buffers, adoption of the DRB to perform all DRB related functions, and redefined home occupations. There were no questions or comments from the public. Heidi noted there is a step process to be followed but the required hearing process is now complete. Motion by Jeff Towle to accept the zoning bylaw updates from the Planning Commission as re-written. Motion was seconded by Chris Yates – **APPROVED.**

D. Town of Highgate / Pre-Town Meeting Info Session & Budget Discussion

Jeff read through the articles from the warning, leaving time for questions and comments in between, and Tom will go through the money articles (general fund and highway fund).

Article #1 – To elect the following town officers (these will be on Australian ballot)

- 1) A Moderator for the ensuing year
- 2) One Selectboard Member for a term of three years
- 3) One Selectboard Member for a term of two years
- 4) One Lister for a term of three years
- 5) One Auditor for a term of three years
- 6) One Tax Collector for a term of one year
- 7) One Trustee of Trust Funds for a term of three years
- 8) One Library Trustee for a term of five years
- 9) One Town Agent for a term of one year
- 10) One Cemetery Commissioner for a term of five years
- 11) One Second Constable for a term of one year

There were no questions on Article #1

Article #2 – Shall the Town of Highgate authorize the Selectboard to appoint a First Constable, and if needed a Second Constable, in which case at least the First Constable shall be appointed? (this will be on Australian ballot)

There were no questions on Article #2.

Article #3 – To receive and act on the reports of the town officers for the past year.

There were no questions on Article #3.

Article #4 – Shall the voters of the Town of Highgate appropriate \$920,961 to meet the expenses and liabilities of the General Fund, with an estimated \$328,686 to be raised by taxes?

Tom reviewed the proposed budget for the general fund beginning on page 25 of the town report. We have been transitioning over the last few budget cycles, so for comparison purposes they are not the best. We are working on a capital plan which will be wrapped up in the fall. The goal is to segregate operational activity from capital expenses. Tom feels it's a good idea to work with as few funds as possible, so within the proposed general fund budget you will see the transfer station info is folded into the general fund. We are beginning to also expand parks and recreation components within the general fund and detailing the library budget within the general fund also. Moving to page 26 in the town report, the capital fund has its own holding account and the reserves are listed. The transfer station money has largely been used towards the purchase of highway vehicles. Richard Noel asked if we are still paying a yearly fee at the capped landfill. Heidi noted that we went through an extensive review to shift from post closure care into custodial care, which relieves us of the obligations to test wells and do physical inspections. It is a ten year permit, so for the next ten years we are obligated to visually check it and keep mowing the landfill cover. Also, part of our permit is to stabilize the banks of that property so the capped landfill stays stable. In ten years they will inspect it again, if there is no deterioration or shifting we could be granted another ten years of custodial care, which saves us \$7,000.00 per year. Moving to page 27 of the report, in both the general fund and highway fund there is grant activity. Some grant sources are smaller and will likely pass through the operating account. Heidi has been successful with grants, which is good! Richard Noel asked about the triggering of an audit due to certain types of grants. Tom noted that if we get rid of the internal auditor positions and go with an outside yearly audit we will always have an audit to present if we have a bond vote. The audit we just had was \$12,000.00 with Sullivan & Powers. It is likely that the cost would go down over time once we have systems in place including policies and procedures. Multi-year contracts should also bring the price down and require less time. It is a good idea to market every 3-5 years for an audit firm. We currently pay our internal auditors a stipend of \$500.00 each per year. The arena facility will be leased by MAHA at a new lease amount of \$12,000.00 per year and they will pay their own electricity bill. This will mean an adjustment on page 33 for the electricity line item, that will come out, and need to be amended at town meeting. The legal services line item was hit hard this cycle, largely due to contractual issues and enforcement issues that Heidi is dealing with. Tom noted we also switched legal firms this past year. With regard to appropriations, anything that people want to adjust or amend can be done from the floor during the general fund discussion. There have been questions about some of these and it is appropriate to discuss them individually, which we anticipate might happen. Richard Noel noted that if we move to Australian ballot we would not be able to do this in the future. Ambulatory services are based on what was presented to us by MVR. Steve Bushey asked if we are still having any hazardous waste days at the transfer station. No, we are not. It all goes to the Georgia VT location. You need to call first before bringing anything, but it is available to us all year as part of the NWSWD. Henry asked if there would be any hopes for a satellite location here in Highgate, it was mentioned before. Our rep for the NWSWD board is Luke Choiniere and he is not here tonight. We will be looking for a new representative once Luke's term with the Selectboard is up in March. There is a line item for parks, which is the maintenance of grounds and structures, and a separate line item for recreation, which is for programming. This is based on feedback from the MAHA facilities board and the newly created Parks & Recreation Committee. The public library is also being expanded as a department within the general fund. All payroll is handled in house and expenses were handled through library staff and through the trustees. This will continue to be the case, but as the building ages we

are getting a clearer picture of line items associated with the library. It looks different than what we are used to. Tom is hopeful he captured the numbers correctly, and if not they can be amended at town meeting if there are errors. The Planning Commission has realigned itself to be more long term planning for the town and working with the NRPC. Tom reminded everyone that when we are going through the general fund article, we can amend anything, so please look everything over carefully. Henry asked about the professional development line item, which is mostly training through VLCT.

Article #5 – Shall the voters of the Town of Highgate appropriate \$691,847 to meet the expenses and liabilities of the Highway Fund, with an estimated \$541,391 to be raised by taxes?

Again, Tom noted that the 2014 and 2015 columns were not the best for comparison due to abnormal cycles. We had budgeted assuming that paving would occur in a certain way and it did not. We ended up with activity that crossed over periods. There were two fairly sizeable grants, Class II Paving Grant and Structures Grant. The majority of the income is from property taxes and state aid, which we get quarterly. The vehicle maintenance line item has been increased slightly due to the Mack and the one-ton getting older, there might be more expenses. Richard Noel asked about the insurance buyout, which is \$4,800.00 per person for any employee that does not use the health insurance offered by the town. We have increased the stone and gravel line item. It is probably still not enough but we had not tweaked it up in a few years. The paving material line item is also bumped up. Steve Ploof spoke briefly about the gravel line item. Based on what Tom has presented and using the current grand list we have now (the new one is not done until next summer), Tom calculates the total municipal tax to be .2283, compared to last year it was .2323 – so they are very similar, and that was the goal. Henry asked about Bridge 25. Jeff noted we did not put aside anything this year. Richard Noel added that we could take this year off because we have \$225,000.00 set aside and the total we need is projected to be \$309,000.00. Tom encouraged anyone with questions to give him a call at the office. Steve Bushey asked if the first year of the arena bond vote is in this budget. Yes, based on an estimate from the bond bank, \$25,000.00 is built in. We have also been approached by Merchants Bank about borrowing, which we can do either bonds or notes. It is Tom's understanding that there is greater flexibility with traditional banking. When he gets more information it will be circulated to the board.

Article #6 – Shall the voters of the Town of Highgate authorize the elimination of the office of Town Auditor, with future audits to be performed by a certified public accountant, and all other auditor duties performed by others as directed by the Selectboard?

Richard Noel had a question about the wording on Article #6, Auditor vs. Auditors, which Tom clarified.

Article #7 – Shall the voters of the Town of Highgate vote all municipal budgets and all public questions by Australian ballot?

With regard to Article #7, Henry Rainville inquired why the town put this article out and the school did not. Jeff answered that the school was asked about it, it was their decision whether or not to warn it for town meeting. Henry asked what it would mean for town meeting if the town passes this. The town would vote on a ballot, and the school from the floor. Henry also asked if there would still be a town meeting for the school portion, yes, there would have to be, and on the town side, if this article passes, we would have an informational meeting and then vote everything on Australian ballot. Tom pointed out that state law breaks it down into three parts – elected officers, budgets and public questions. We already vote all our town officers on the ballot, so this article is addressing town budgets and town public questions. The discussion at town meeting could have us end up looking at both pieces (budgets and public questions), one piece or neither piece.

Article #8 – Shall the voters of the Town of Highgate set a final date of payment for the FY2016 property taxes to be Tuesday, October 27, 2015 with payments to be received in the town office by 5:00pm or postmarked by October 27, 2015?

There were no questions on Article #8.

Article #9 – To transact any other business legally authorized to be transacted, considered proper and necessary when met.

There were no questions on Article #9.

E. Highgate Elementary School Board / Pre-Town Meeting Info Session & Budget Discussion

Connie Beyor introduced the Highgate Elementary School Board as well as Winton Goodrich, Superintendent and Marcel Choquette, Principal. Connie also congratulated Karen Gagne-Fortin on the 2014 Town of Highgate town report dedication.

Connie had a power point presentation to share, and noted it had been a very difficult year to budget for a variety of reasons. The goal of the school board is to provide a high quality education at a reasonable cost to taxpayers.

Innovative Practice

- SWIFT (School Wide Integrated Framework for Transformation) – the goal is to make resources available to help all regular and special education students succeed
- Math Studio – an intense and highly effective professional development system where a team of educators use data and observation to provide direct feedback to an individual teacher
- Social Thinking – establishes common language that helps students and teachers communicate successfully
- Math Instruction – grades 3-6 each have a designated math teacher who provides all direct instruction

Centralization of Special Education Professional Staff & Benefits

As mandated by the state, all Special Education professional staff salaries and benefits have been transferred from all local schools to the FNWSU. Costs at the SU level are budgeted in the same manner as they are in the local Special Education budget line items, salaries and benefits are now reflected within the FNWSU assessments to schools. All other Special Education expenses remain at the local level for this year. Tom Racine asked about the purpose of this. Connie said one reason is cost savings, another is there might be flexibility to take a special educator with specified training and put those skills to use in a particular place within the Supervisory Union. Part of the strategy is to designate one person to cover the district with their skill set. In smaller schools, the special educator has to be a jack of all trades. The state has been moving for a number of years towards operation at the Supervisory Union level in an effort to spend more on learning resources and less on operations. Transportation is being moved to the Supervisory Union as well. Efficiency is the intent behind the legislation. Tom asked if this is a stepping stone towards consolidation. Jeff asked if this is getting away from local control or is the Supervisory Union the control? Winton Goodrich sees this as both and sees it as a team approach.

Declining Student Enrollment

- Vermont student population has decreased by 20% over the past decade
- Highgate Elementary School enrollment has decreased by 12 students since 2012
- School leaders considered declining enrollment in an effort to reduce cost while maintaining educational programming and meeting recommended state quality standards

Enrollment Trends

- FY2012 there were 307 students at Highgate Elementary
- FY2015 there are 295 students at Highgate Elementary. This does not take into account our pre-school and pre-K students, of which there are 44 of them

Total Current Staff

- Professionals Pre-K – 6 = 37.5 teachers, interventionists, student support leader, principal and assistant principal
- Support Pre-K – 6 = 7.26 office support, fiscal services, custodians and technology services

- Paraprofessionals Pre-K – 6 = 22.5 paraprofessionals

Adjustments made to create the budget

- 1 – professional staff salary and benefit reduction
- 1- support staff position reduction
- Paraprofessionals workday reduced by 30 minutes (saves approximately \$20,000.00)
- Anticipated health insurance premium increase of 4.5%
- Anticipated dental insurance premium decrease of 7%
- Reduction in computer equipment line item following FY15 investment
- Increase in professional development and staff training lines
- 30% decrease in energy costs over a three year period

Connie noted that all schools in our district have gone back to the MVU dismissal time of 2:37pm which gives a block at the end of the day for teachers to do collaboration and professional development.

FY2016 School District Budget proposed to taxpayers

\$4,752,340.00 – this is a 1.4% increase compared to FY2015, or \$65,602.00

Historical Budget Increases

FY2012 -1.54%
 FY2013 +3.97%
 FY2014 +4.38%
 FY2015 +3.75%
 FY2016 +1.40%

Cost comparisons with similar schools

Highgate's ranking of school budget spending per equalized pupil is the 95th least expensive out of 105 Vermont school districts that are a member of a union or joint high school.

FY2015 School District Data (cited from Agency of Education)

SCHOOL DISTRICT	GRADES OFFERED	EQUALIZED PUPIL	ED SPENDING PER EQUALIZED PUPIL
BRISTOL	PK-6	277.95	\$14,567.34
HIGHGATE	PK-6	302.04	\$13,762.98
RANDOLPH	PK-6	316.36	\$12,668.18

Projected Homestead Tax Rate – after CLA adjustment & with proposed special article

	2014-15	2015-16	Increase
HIGHGATE	\$0.0647	\$0.0654	7/10 of one cent \$0.007

FY2016 projected rates are calculated using an estimated statewide base tax rate of \$1.00 and base spending amount of \$9,459.00 – actual tax rate billed may vary based on any action taken during the current legislative session.

Jeff asked about the base spending figure of \$9,459.00 which the state sets. Winton Goodrich said it's a very complicated formula and the bottom line, for tonight's purposes is it's a number in the calculation and nothing more.

Decreased Projected Education Spending

FY2015	FY2016	Difference
\$4,156,669.00	\$4,061,553.00	Decrease of 2.3% (\$95,116.00)
	<i>Estimated Statewide Ed Spending</i>	<i>Increase 4.2%</i>

Connie noted that just today it was predicted that the state base rate will increase 4.2%

Capital Projects & Facility

- FY14 Natural Gas conversion and upgrade (continues to provide savings in energy costs)
- Successful completion of Drainage Project in FY15 – White Building (total project cost of \$69,951.00 – significantly under budget)
- Phone system upgrade in FY15 (complete with 911 compliance)
- Security and accessibility upgrades completed in FY15 (front door buzzer system, new doors and locks, additional parking spaces and curb work)

FY16 Special Article for Voter Consideration

Will the voters of the Highgate Town School District appropriate \$25,000.00 to the existing Capital Reserve Fund?

- The existing Capital Reserve Fund balance is approximately \$74,571.00 Steve Bushey asked what they use it for. Connie noted such things as the parking lot needs work, the roof, security cameras, and other big projects.

What Affects the Tax Rate

- Budget – proposed by school board – decided by the tax payers
 - Revenues – State and federal funds (\$761,870)
 - Equalized Pupil – 2 year weighted average of students (304.83)
 - Base Spending Amount – set by the legislature (\$9,459.00)
 - Base Tax Rate – Set by legislature (\$1.00)
 - CLA – set by listers and state (112.62%)
 - Ratio of elementary to MVU students (elementary 52.27%, MVU 47.73%)
- There was some discussion regarding the CLA and whether or not being over 100% is helping us or hurting us. The town tax rate is set by the voters, the education tax rate is a function of the state. It's a way of equalizing, a way of making things comparable to the best it can be. A high CLA can trigger a reappraisal, not necessarily a full reappraisal, but on a smaller scale maybe. Richard Noel gave some input, as a former lister for the town. Bank assessments and town assessments are comparing apples to oranges. Our assessments are the same from 2008, where our bank appraisals have gone down. Tom noted that this past tax cycle we sent two bills. It was suggested that we might want to wait for a budget to pass before we bill. It was a very confusing process with two billings and we likely won't do that again. Tom also had some questions for Lora McAllister regarding page 87 in the town report, FY2015 on the revenue side relative to other years dips quite a bit. Lora will look into it and get back to Tom. Her guess is it is related to special education reimbursements. Tom also added that Highgate had the highest jump in spending in our district. Were there elevated special ed expenses that were not reimbursed in the same period? Winton Goodrich added that special education student reimbursement rates are 57% vs. intensive special education student reimbursement rates being at 90%, so that can add up very quickly.

Steve Bushey thanked the school board for their time and effort. They do a great job of taking the tax payer into consideration while providing a great education for the kids. Chris Yates added that for what we spend, we offer an excellent education. David Roddy agreed, it is as good as anywhere else in the state. Liza Comiskey reminded everyone about the 1st Annual Duct Tape Derby on Saturday 2/21 @ 1pm at Carter Hill. As of today she has 34 sleds registered and more are expected. There is a build it night at the fire department tomorrow night, 2/20, for anyone that needs assistance or materials for their entry. The winner of the derby will have bragging rights and their sled displayed on a float on Memorial Day in the parade. Connie noted that Richard Flint, Nola Gilbert and Liza Comiskey have their terms up at Town Meeting. Richard and Nola will be running again, Liza will not be.

Contact Information

- Connie Beyor, Chair 868-3371 Term ends 2017
- Richard Flint 868-2652 Term ends 2015
- David Roddy 868-2540 Term ends 2016
- Nola Gilbert 868-2230 Term ends 2015
- Liza Comiskey Appointed, not running for a future board seat
- Winton Goodrich, Superintendent wgoodrich@fnwsu.org, 868-4967 x17

Voting information

Tuesday, March 3, 2015 – Highgate Elementary School

Town Meeting begins @ 10am
Polls open for Australian ballot voting 7am-7pm

F. Town Treasurer – Tom Racine

1. Pay bills

The only question was about the tire mount, which was for Steve's truck.

2. Updates

We have frozen pipes again at the town office (second time in a week). Steve said when they dug it up on Saturday 2/14 they hit a power cord that comes from the pole towards the fire department side of the building. Steve has called Swanton Village. With regard to the frozen septic, Steve thinks in the spring they need to dig around the tank and use styrofoam to insulate the tank and the line. We will need to leave a faucet running so it doesn't freeze up again. Drummac will try to be back in tomorrow, Friday 2/20, but they are pretty busy right now with lots of freeze ups.

G. Town Clerk – Wendi Dusablon

1. Minutes

Motion by Chris Yates to approve the minutes from February 5, 2015 as corrected. Motion was seconded by Andy King – **APPROVED.**

2. Town meeting updates

- The last day to register to vote is Wednesday, Feb. 25th by 5pm
- Absentee ballots can be requested at any time
- Town reports are in and can be picked up at Desorcies Market, McCuins, Highgate Public Library, Martins General Store, the Municipal Offices, and Highgate Arena. There is also a link on the website. Please call if you need a copy mailed to you, 868-4697 x 201.
- Town Meeting Day, March 3rd @ Highgate Elementary School. Town Meeting starts @ 10am, polls are open 7am-7pm.
- Lunch will be available to purchase and hosted by Highgate Historical Society, \$6.00 for turkey & biscuits. Take out is available.
- Free child care is available at Town Meeting. Please call by March 1st to let us know so we can plan accordingly.

H. Town Administrator – Heidi Britch-Valenta

1. Updates

- Heidi has a few things to share in executive session regarding a legal matter.
- Quick update on the arena progress – The Arena Construction Committee has been meeting on a regular basis. A Construction Management firm has been hired and an RFP has been issued for the cooling system. Results should be back tomorrow and they are meeting on Feb. 23rd to make a determination on that. They are soliciting donations from area businesses. They are very interested in connecting with businesses and residents who utilize the arena but are not part of the bond debt. If you are interested in helping, contact us. There is also a website donation page on the town website www.highgatevt.org and information on the Town of Highgate FaceBook page also.

I. Selectboard Items

1. Arena Construction Committee update

See above under Town Admin.

J. Upcoming Events

Feb. 21	1pm	Duct Tape Derby @ Carter Hill
Feb. 23	4pm	Arena Construction Committee Mtg.
Feb. 25	by 5pm	Last day to register to vote at Town Mtg.
Feb. 28	4pm-8pm	HVFD sliding party @ Carter Hill
Mar. 3	10am	Town Mtg. @ Highgate Elem. School polls open 7am-7pm
Mar. 5	7pm	Selectboard Mtg.
Mar. 12	6pm	DRB Mtg.
Mar. 14	10am-noon	Rabies Clinic @ Fire Station

K. Executive Session

Motion by Jeff Towle to enter into executive session for a legal matter @ 9:00pm.
Motion was seconded by Andy King – **APPROVED.**

Motion by Chris Yates to exit executive session @ 10:10pm. Motion was seconded by Andy King – **APPROVED.**

L. Adjournment

Motion by Chris Yates to adjourn the meeting @ 10:15pm. Motion was seconded by Jeff Towle – **APPROVED.**

Respectfully submitted by:

_____ Wendi Dusablon, Highgate Town Clerk

Minutes approved by:

_____ Jeff Towle, Chair - Highgate Selectboard