

# TOWN OF HIGHGATE

## Selectboard Meeting & Ambulatory Services Provider Public Discussion

April 6, 2016 @ 7pm  
Highgate Elementary School (Library)

### 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 Selectboard Chair, Chris Yates @ 7:01pm, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.

**Highgate Selectboard Members** – Chris Yates – Chair; Paulette Tatro – Vice-Chair; Randy Connelly; Josh LaRocque

**Highgate Office Staff** – Wendi Dusablon - Town Clerk; Heidi Britch-Valenta – Town Administrator; Shelley Laroche – Town Treasurer

**Public / Other** – Jean Chevalier, Highgate; Chris Uzell, Highgate; Sarah Chevalier, Highgate; Walt Krul, Georgia (AmCare); Stephen Bushey, Highgate; Clarence Miller, Highgate; Dawn Britch, Highgate; Barbara Chevalier, Highgate; Claude Chevalier, Highgate; Jeff Towle, Highgate Springs; Josh Ramsdell, Richford (MVR); Janice Smith, Swanton (MVR); David St. Pierre, Swanton; Ralph Comiskey, Highgate; Brian Benoit, Swanton; Merry Souza, Highgate; Polly Gadbois, Franklin; Pat Gagne, Highgate; Richard Fortin, Highgate; Kristine Stell, Swanton; Ashley Chevalier, Swanton; Daniel Chevalier, Swanton; Jason Cross, Swanton; Nicole Cross, Swanton; Henry Rainville, Highgate; Tanya Bailey, Highgate; Kim Flint, Highgate; Richard Laroche, Highgate; Jay Sweeny, St. Albans Town; Ricki Calderwood, Highgate; James Maskell, Highgate; Paul Gagne, Highgate; Nancy Flint, Highgate; John Lumsden, Highgate; Skip Morgan, Highgate; Jennifer Gagne, Highgate; Justin Billado, Swanton; Michael Sibenaller, Highgate Springs; Sandra Stone, Highgate; Robin Trushaw, Highgate; Andy King, Highgate; Eric Chevalier, Highgate; Eric Bessette, Highgate; Keith Ploof, Highgate; Mike LaFrance, Highgate; Sharon Bousquet, Highgate; Alice S. Cota, Highgate; Lynn Billado, Swanton; Jess Ramsdell, Richford (MVR); Lori Olds, Highgate Springs; Mary A. Roy, Highgate Springs; Matt Roy, Highgate Springs; Dick Souza, Highgate; Leonard Stell, Swanton; Kyle Lothian, Highgate; Fernand Gagne, Highgate; Paul Rocheleau, Swanton; Sabrina Wimple, Swanton; Nick Trivento, Swanton; Michael Lambert, Highgate; Kelly Rainville, Highgate; Anne Ives, Highgate; Melissa Ives, Highgate; Elaine Ezerins, St. Albans Messenger; Evangeline LaRocque, Highgate Center; Matthew Depatie, Highgate; Joshua Aldrich, Berkshire; Lynn Calderwood, Highgate; Katie Davis, Highgate; Richard Noel, Highgate; Sheriff Norris, Sheldon (FCSO); Rocky Berry, Sheldon; Kevin Flint, Highgate; Jeff Eaton, Highgate; Collette Laramée, Highgate Center; David Rouse, Highgate; Derick Billado, Swanton; Danny Billado, Swanton; Rebecca Howrigan, Highgate.

#### **B. Public Comments (for items not on the agenda)**

None

#### **C. Ambulatory Services Provider Public Discussion**

Chris thanked everyone for attending this evening and began by explaining why we are here and some steps that will be followed during the course of this discussion. We are here to discuss ambulance services for the Town of Highgate and also hold our regular Selectboard meeting. State of Vermont statute gives authority explicitly to the Selectboard, not the voters, to expend funds and contract for services, so the Selectboard is under no obligation to hold this forum. Due to the sensitivity of the topic in our community, the board decided as a whole to hold this forum. The guidelines for this meeting will be; 1) keep your comments respectful to all others 2) anyone who is disrespectful will be asked to leave immediately 3) we have guests here from other communities, only Highgate residents will be allowed to speak 4) all questions or comments should be addressed to the Selectboard 5) the Selectboard may defer questions to either MVR or AmCare –

MVR responses will come only from Joey Stell and AmCare responses will come only from Walter Krul 6) please try to keep your questions and comments concise and to the point. Chris then opened the floor to questions from the Selectboard and will then move on to Highgate residents. Paulette recently read an article about a second ambulance with a second crew being put into place as of April 1<sup>st</sup>. Chief Stell said that is correct and they will be staffed 12 hour shifts during the day Monday through Friday with two crew members and two on the other. They are all currently paid members, but they are looking at different options for staffing that truck. Paulette asked for some more clarification. Chief Stell further stated that they took some of their three person crews and made them into two person crews, adding additional staff for two purposes; 1) day shift is the busiest time so revenue not in the budget will be made up with additional call volume and 2) not having to call in mutual aid to cover calls in Swanton and Highgate, which adds to increased response times in both communities. Randy asked both MVR and AmCare where they collect their data from on response times. Previously MVR had supplied data on response times which was generated from Google maps, so Randy is curious where the numbers came from. MVR data is based on actual calls responded to from 2012-2016 from data collected by dispatch that is put into their records and can be verified through dispatch and / or their own time keeping method. Paulette piggy backed on that question to MVR and asked if the response times in the evening are from the 120 First Street location or from the overnight quarters. Chief Stell answered those times in the evening are from leaving 120 First Street. The data presented is not broken down between day / night calls. Day time response times are obviously quicker. Randy asked if it is from the moment it is toned, yes – as soon as dispatch tones it starts the response time. Walt Krul from AmCare verified that it is the same for them with response times, it begins from the time central dispatch tones out the call. Randy also asked MVR about their response times to different parts of town, because but did not include data for East Highgate or Highgate Falls and why those times are not available. Chief Stell said Highgate Falls and East Highgate are included and are considered part of the Highgate Center response times, their system does not separate them out, so without going through all the calls to verify, they presented what the automated system does for them. Chris has a question / concern about transport time, it has come to his attention as being a critical time. More recently there are more calls for drivers and lift assist, which slows transport time down. Chief Stell said they go through a QA/QI critique procedure every month and the standard for arriving on scene to the time you are in your vehicle and moving, with some exceptions, is 15 minutes or less, that is the national standard they are held to. There are variables that may come into play, but their standard is 15 minutes or less. Walt verified that the guideline is the same for them, also with variables. Josh asked MVR how they came up with response times on their FaceBook page to Jones Road, for example, Chief Stell said those are Google map times, and he can't validate them, it would be based on roads taken to get there. Randy asked both about rates, do they charge a different rate if a community is not a member. MVR is not allowed to charge differential rates, per the federal government. AmCare said regardless they charge based on the level of care that is provided. There were no other questions or comments from the Selectboard. Chris opened it up to questions from the residents of Highgate in the audience for public comment. He asked that people please stand and state their name for the record so Wendi can include it in the minutes. Steve Bushey stated that looking at the data there is less than \$20,000.00 between the two services, and he wants the board to look at the best overall value and best service that we can possibly get for the Town of Highgate. There are a lot of factors to consider, response time is a good indicator, but the care provided when they arrive is also very important. Lynn Calderwood asked if there would be a difference in the amount that is also charged to the patient. She was involved in an accident this fall in St. Albans and AmCare responded. They were great, but it was over \$700.00 for the care she received and transport to the hospital for just a few minutes trip. Walt said it is all based on a base rate level of care and transport distance. It does not matter where they live or if they are from a town that contracts with AmCare. Chris asked Walt if what people have to pay out of pocket also depends on what they have for insurance – yes, that is a big factor also because everyone has different deductibles, but billing is the same. Lynn asked how the two services compare. Chief Stell answered that base rates are very similar and that each service has flexibility in what their base rate billings are. MVR has patients that can't pay their deductible or their co-pays. Those are bills that MVR will write off. They will collect what they can from insurance and they don't go after the patient for the portion they are not able to pay. Chris asked Chief

Stell to clarify how that is fair to those that can "afford" to pay the bill and someone who can't pay. Who makes that decision who can pay and who can't? Chief Stell said that they have a demographic with a lot of elderly people on straight Medicare that can't afford to pay it and live month to month. For those that have no way of paying, MVR just deals with it. AmCare does also have charitable write-offs as well on a case-by-case basis. Walt further stated that with Medicare you have to be careful about automatically writing things off. They don't like look favorably on using private services to have co-insurance. The OIG has lots of conflicting decisions on whether that is considered co-insurance, but AmCare certainly has had instances where people simply can't afford to pay it. Typically for Medicare patients, co-pays are in the \$40.00 - \$50.00 range, and people can do payments over time as well. Sue Cota spoke about her experiences with MVR when she has had to call for their services on two occasions in 2014. Both times the service from MVR was outstanding. She asked the board if any of them have had to use ambulance services personally – all four board members answered no. Eric Bessette spoke very emotionally about his experiences with MVR and the support he has had from them. He expressed concern about response time with AmCare vs. response time with MVR. He asked if AmCare would provide emotional support to people or families until contact is made with additional family. Walt answered yes, they would, and that is common. Psychological first aid is part of every call. David Rouse clarified what he thought Eric was asking. Would AmCare respond for emotional support and would they charge? Walt said it would likely be an AmCare crew, not an individual person and they do not bill if there is no transport. Chris agrees that Mr. Bessette brought up a good point. MVR used to be a volunteer squad, and now they are a fully paid squad, so we need to look at them as equals. Tanya Bailey asked where the transport mileage starts from for transport fees. Chief Stell answered for both because that is dictated by insurance. It is loaded mileage from once they are at the patient's side to the hospital. Walt added that Medicare specifies tenth of miles, so with Medicare you will see decimal point mileage, and with other carriers its rounded up to the next whole mile. Anne Ives said that recently she was transported to UVM Medical Center and was transported by AmCare and it was the worst ambulance ride she has ever had, very bumpy and she felt like a piece of meat. She has not had a bad experience with MVR, and agrees with Mr. Bessette about the personal experience. Mrs. Ives also asked about the \$20,000.00 savings and how much that is per taxpayer. Shelley Laroche, Highgate Treasurer, stated that .01 cent on the tax rate raises about \$30,000.00 based on our current grand list, meaning in this instance, less than .01 cent per hundred dollars worth of assessed value on your property. Mrs. Ives asked where the savings would go, would it go back to the taxpayers – yes, it will. Chris noted that we had a capital campaign that was cut at town meeting, so we have to figure out how to save money or raise money to fill the gap. Mrs. Ives understands that this is a board decision, but urged them to really think about all the factors. Heidi pointed out that response times have a lot to do with where you live in town. Mrs. Ives asked how this all came about and why the board decided to look at other ambulance services. Chris explained the increases over time and that ambulatory services is a large line item in our budget. The increases with MVR over the past ten years have averaged 10%. We currently pay \$10,000.00 per month to MVR, and with an amount like that you have to look at it and say "are we getting the best bang for our buck". The board owed it to the taxpayers to go out and get a competitive bid, which is what the board did. Sharon Bousquet pointed out that one is a for profit business and one is a non-profit business. She personally thanked all MVR staff and would prefer to be in their hands, but thanked the Selectboard for trying to manage the taxpayers' money. In this case Sharon believes that MVR is a better choice. Katie Davis works in the health care field and feels that when it comes to budgets and health care, they are like oil and water. The topic is highly emotional. She has nothing bad to say about either MVR or AmCare, but she knows the MVR people and that means the world to her, again reiterating she is not speaking badly of AmCare. She feels there is trust with MVR which is worth the \$20,000.00 difference. Kelly Rainville noted that MVR went from a totally volunteer staff to all paid staff. She would like the board to stop using the 10% average increase per year figure, she does not feel that is accurate if you consider that change. Kelly wanted to know aside from that change what the budget increase been averaging, from the point where they went to a paid team, what is their budget increase. Chief Stell said from last year to this year there is a 0% increase, and taking out the spike of going to a full paid service they are averaging a 3% average increase per year. Kelly asked AmCare, because they are a business, how can the run a business for profit and charge \$20,000.00 less,

what is not included in their bid, and asked if dispatching is or is not included in their bid and what will be included in three years that is not now? Walt answered that there are no dispatching services included in his bid. Chris reminded Kelly to direct her questions and comments to the board, not any individual persons. Chris pointed out that we currently pay for EMS and fire dispatching. Over the years, Highgate has given a loan to MVR throughout the year and overpaid for EMS services just to have to turn around and bill them for a service we already paid for. We pay central dispatch a fee, separate from fire and ambulance, but for some reason MVR includes it in their budget so we pay it and at the end of the year we have to send them a bill to pay us back, which makes no sense. We asked to have that removed, which is why our number went from \$126,000.00 to \$100,000.00. There are no dispatching fees included in any of these numbers. Kelly expressed concern about at the end of three years when AmCare writes them a new contract and if there will be new fees not included in this contract. Chris did not think it was appropriate to enter into a discussion with Walt on that tonight, because that is a contract negotiation in which the board would enter into negotiations at that time with the service provider. Kelly disagreed, stating they are the ones paying for it and it would be appropriate to know what they will be paying for. Walt answered there is nothing missing from this agreement, everything is included. Heidi informed everyone that AmCare had originally offered a ten year contract with a 2% yearly increase. The attorney that represents the town advised us to not enter into such a long contract, but AmCare was willing to lock in for ten years. Kelly asked if the same was ever asked of MVR – yes, it was. Kelly can see MVR's reluctance to lock in long term, being a non-profit organization. Chris stated that the unfortunate part of going year-to-year is that it could also go up 10%, also noting there are a lot of unknowns. Kelly feels MVR is being punished for having to pay their employees. Keith Ploof is involved with MVR rescue and is a resident of Highgate. He read aloud from a petition that has been circulated around for signatures of registered Highgate voters; *We the undersigned legal voters of the Town of Highgate hereby petition the Selectboard of the Town of Highgate Vermont to contract with Missisquoi Valley Rescue, Inc. for ambulance coverage in the amount of \$100,800 for three years with a maximum of 2% increase per year. We certify that we are presently voters of the Town of Highgate Vermont.* Keith presented the petitions with 229 signatures. Chris asked Keith if the signatures had been verified by the clerk – no, they have not. They would need to be verified, and Chris pointed out that the voters cannot force the Selectboard into a contract. Keith Ploof gave the petitions to Wendi so they can be verified. Clarence Miller appreciates the board taking the time to do this, and reminded them if they cut MVR out of the business there will be no one else to go to for bids, other than AmCare, and they will be able to set the pricing where they want to. Jean Chevalier sees that the board doesn't understand why the voters reacted the way they did to the capital budget and other things at town meeting. The voters feel that the board is elected to search for the information and bring it back to the voters and let them vote on it. She doesn't think the Selectboard is ever elected to be a "Gestapo" type of thing, and sometimes she feels that attitude comes across. She understands they have the control, but really thinks they need to listen to the voters. They were elected to be equal partners with the voters, not be the end all, and should be working together like a married couple. Kelly Rainville asked for more information on the difference between a paramedic and EMT. Walt answered that it is a matter of training hours which involves a yearlong training program at VTC. The training incorporates clinical training and rotations in the Emergency Department, Cardiology, ICU, CCU, Pediatrics and the Operating Room. Much of the course is geared toward the classroom portion and the other part is clinical rotations working in facilities. Kelly asked what a paramedic is allowed to do that the highest level EMT can't do - different medications and a higher level of surgical interventions and assessing situations. Pain management is an important factor, especially on longer transport times. Kelly asked if a paramedic is on site, but does not perform any paramedic level functions, how does that affect billing? Walt answered that if paramedic level services are provided, the billing is done accordingly, and that MediCare is very specific on these things. Kelly asked if MVR is looking to get paramedics and when they would be available. Chief Stell answered they have one licensed paramedic on staff and one pending application that would be coming on board. Chief Stell spoke to using AmCare for paramedic intercept. Katie Davis asked if AmCare has a paramedic on staff on every bus that they run – yes, they do, often two paramedics on 24/7 during the day time, and not unusual to have three paramedics on duty at times, and AmCare has a total of six ambulances. David

Rouse asked how many current members MVR has – 22. He pointed out if you take that \$100,000.00 and divide that by the number of members, we are talking about \$5,000.00 per person. We have employees for the town making \$50,000.00, \$60,000.00, \$70,000.00 that work 8am-4pm, yet we have rescue personnel that go out all hours in all conditions, why are we complaining? Kyle Lothian is new to Highgate, he moved here about four months ago. He wants to commend the board for bringing up this topic, nobody likes change. He has served on a Selectboard in a neighboring town, he has fought fire with some in this room and been cared for by MVR. Having said that, the emotion in this room is just bubbling! When you get that emotional, to him, you have a one track mind in many ways, in his opinion. The Selectboard is asked to look at every line item to save money, every one. The number one priority has to be patient care. He was also an EMT on Franklin Rescue for four years, and served as a volunteer fire department for thirty years. He has the utmost respect for all EMS, they don't get enough credit for what they see and do. Having said all that, what really bothers him is the stuff on social media that has come out. It is absolutely classless and direct assaults on people for doing a job that is absolutely thankless, the board has a thankless job. Those personal attacks cannot be part of any squad. If you can't contain a crew to control themselves (referring to the threats on social media directed at an individual Highgate Selectboard member), that really bothers Kyle. No one likes change, and he is not saying the town should change their rescue service. The people matter and when the board is attacked for trying to save money, he just doesn't get it. He thanked the board for bringing it up and thanked MVR and AmCare for being here. He understands the decision is the boards and wished them luck. Anne Ives had comments about paramedics vs. EMT level services and compared it to seeing your primary physician vs. seeing the physician's assistant. She feels you still get quality care. Lynn Calderwood asked, if Highgate pulls out of MVR, what will be the future of MVR? Chris answered that they have been told that MVR would survive, but deferred the question to Chief Stell. Chief Stell responded that MVR could survive without Highgate definitely for one year, but at the end of three years it may put them in position to be unable to serve either community, Swanton or Highgate. Kyle Lothian asked if it would be possible to split the town to be served by both MVR and AmCare? Chief Stell feels that even a split would be detrimental to MVR and Walt answered that it hasn't previously been considered, so they would have to look at it to see if it is realistically possible. Katie Davis asked about mutual aid and who covers for who if all their rigs are tied up. Currently MVR and AmCare use each other for mutual aid. If MVR is cut out of the picture and all AmCare rigs were busy, they would call in additional AmCare Staff and then if necessary use other services like Enosburg or Milton, depending on the location of the call. All squads are required to follow a mutual aid plan and a mass casualty plan. Claude Chevalier asked about MVU and if it is in Highgate or Swanton and who would cover those calls at the school. The school is located in the town of Highgate so AmCare would be covering. Claude also asked about onsite ambulances for sporting events. Walt did state back in December at one informational meeting that AmCare would send an ambulance to be on site at all contact sports at no charge if we provide them with the schedule. Lori Olds is a Highgate resident and taxpayer and also a member of MVR. She spoke to the issue of paramedics issuing pain medications and that the patients are sometimes looking for their drug of choice that they can't get at the hospital. She also noted that pain doesn't kill. She has been on the squad since 1989 as a volunteer and now she is paid, and the money is nice. But it does not cover half of what they see or what they do. They do sit with patients and they don't charge for it. Many people here are a neighbor to an MVR member. Lori used to work for AmCare and it's a good service. She lives in Highgate and doesn't want another service in here doing her job taking care of her friends and neighbors. Fire calls in Highgate, the department members know them and they take care of the firefighters. At sporting events, MVR doesn't charge anymore because MVU has their own athletic trainer. Dr. Chip is at MVU on Thursdays and if he feels he needs an ambulance he will call, but an ambulance doesn't need to be sitting at MVU. Lori said that during town meeting Mr. Yates stated this issue would be put to a vote on who would get the ambulance contract, and people at this meeting know that. She wants to hold him to his word that this will go to a vote by the town of Highgate voters. Chris read aloud from the town meeting minutes from March 1, 2016 where Lori Olds spoke and Nancy Flint asked if the board would bring this issue back before the people, and Chris stated that is correct, and that is why we are here tonight. Mrs. Flint feels the board is not listening to what they have to say. Chris stated that many people that are not here tonight have

reached out to the board on this issue as well. Anne Ives doesn't mean to be disrespectful, but feels the board had their minds made up before this meeting, and doesn't understand why we are here. The board is here to listen, and they have to listen objectively and peel out the emotion associated with this topic. Anne can feel the emotion from all sides on this issue, the board included. Eric Besette asked if MVR had their bid in to the board before AmCare did. To him this sounds like the St. Albans PD vs. the FCSO issue a few years ago. Chris said no, they were in the midst of.....and was interrupted by Eric so did not finish his sentence. Eric spoke to a story, years prior, of a Swanton Selectboard member who didn't think the fire department needed a new truck until he had a structure fire that very night at his own barn. Tanya Bailey is new here, a recent homeowner in Highgate. She has never had to use services from MVR or AmCare. She works in the mental health field and many of her clients have been transported by AmCare and she stated they can be cold sometimes. She is looking at Walt who is here by himself this evening, none of his crew is here and MVR are all here. She just wants to know where the AmCare supporters are, and why they aren't here. Chris addressed the issue to some extent, saying that the Highgate community has become hostile lately. He personally had a threat made against him just this week by an MVR employee which was reported to the Sheriff's office. Chris does not blame people for not showing up, it's like stepping in front of a firing squad for sure. Tanya is sorry for Chris' experience, noting that this tight community finds it hard to bring new people in. Michael Sibenaller has lived here for a few years, and asked for clarification on why this can't be a town vote. Heidi elaborated on statute that prohibits voters from demanding that the Selectboard signs a contract. The board is elected to investigate these things for the town. This process began a year ago by meeting with dispatching and both services. The information is vast, so by the time you get to the end, it can be difficult to communicate all the information to the voters in a nutshell. At town meeting the issue came up that the voters want to vote on these topics, but what that does is limit the ability of the Selectboard to function. People are often times making their decisions based on social media posts or side conversations or information condensed into a flyer. Chris further elaborated on this topic, that even if the board decided to warn this as a public vote, it would be a non-binding resolution and would not be an Australian ballot vote, because our town votes public questions from the floor. So even if it went that route, it would be non-binding and have to take place from the floor. We cannot do this tonight because it was not warned in that manner, it was warned as a public discussion. It was also mentioned that some people, regardless of where they fall with their opinion on issues, don't come to town meeting or these public forums because they do not want to get yelled at. Mr. Sibenaller thanked the board for all their work and added that not every topic is this passionate. Jim Maskell commented that he did not realize when the Selectboard got voted in that they were going to be taking over the town. Jean Chevalier asked both firms to clarify the ratios per capita of the areas they cover. AmCare currently covers five towns with six ambulances, and MVR covers two towns with two ambulances. Kyle Lothian does not understand the attack on the Selectboard. They were voted in to do a job, and they are doing it. He has heard the comment several times "we voted you in, we will vote you out", well Kyle isn't very good with numbers, but it appears to him the board is short one already and people aren't running to the aisle to sign up for this thankless job. He does understand and he agrees on this touchy item maybe this should go to the people. By statute, he doesn't think it can go to the voters, and for the voters to pick and choose what they want the board to make decisions on is just unfair. Heidi pointed out that these decisions have been made previously, as the Selectboard for years has been making decisions by renewing the MVR contract without asking, even when there have been dramatic increases. To say that the board is acting "Gestapo" and are taking over the town is misstatement and is not accurate. They have brought information to the public that was not done previously and they should be thanked for their efforts, not attacked. The climate is unpleasant and you are asking this board to serve you and yet are harassing them. You are being provided with more information than ever before and yet continue to insult them. If someone wants to come forward to replace them, you had your opportunity and did not take it. In fact, there was a successful write-in campaign at town meeting and that person also did not take it. To harass these people whenever you have the opportunity is not doing your public any good. What is being created in Highgate is a bullying environment. Mike Lambert is a resident of Highgate and a tax payer in both Highgate and Swanton. It bothers him to see everyone get this emotional. Both the MVR folks and the Selectboard have thankless jobs. The MVR folks do get thanks for what they do, he does not

see the board getting the same. He wonders how much tax revenue comes in that is directly associated with MVR members, or if the board has any idea. The taxes he pays between both towns are 1/3 of the amount we are talking about for this whole thing. Chris directed the question to Chief Stell. He isn't sure how many Highgate residents are on his squad, but a few were present tonight. Henry Rainville asked if the board was petitioned to bring this to a vote on town meeting day, could that happen? Chris said it would have to be a board decision to bring it to the voters. We are not a charter town, so anything outside of state statute we would have to petition to become a charter town and the legislature would have to approve that petition. Katie Davis said the passion in the room speaks to how much we love our town. She understands there are budgets, but compared this situation to if her child really wanted a new toy and for weeks she sacrificed by compromising in other areas, like what she eats, in order to make it happen. She believes we should support what we have and worries what is next, will we be looking for bids from Swanton Fire to replace our fire department? Katie never thought the town would be looking to replace MVR and she wonders where it will stop in the name of saving a budget. David Rouse asked for information on the differences between the petitions presented tonight and those that we sign prior to town meeting for warned articles or elected officers. It was explained to Mr. Rouse that this petition involves a contractual agreement, which is a function of the Selectboard. David Rouse asked about a few years ago at town meeting when an employee of the town at that time had petitioned for a warned article regarding his health insurance through the town, how was that ok? Chris could not speak to that issue, as he was not on the board at that time. Andy King stated that every adult in this room tonight is federally mandated to have health insurance coverage. From the conversation tonight, we know that ambulance services are compensated by towns and they also bill our insurance companies. His general question is, if we are mandated to have health insurance and ambulances charge our health insurance companies, what is the motivation for a town to contract with anybody? Chris asked Walt Krul and Chief Stell if they were aware of any towns that did not contract with an ambulance company – no, they are not aware of any. Walt does not know how any ambulance service could survive without subsidies. Chief Stell agrees and further stated that they would not refuse to respond, but without community support services would be forced out of business. Chief Stell knows of no towns in Vermont without an agreement in place, even towns without contracts provide some sort of support. Andy King further added that it sounds like our tax dollars towards ambulance coverage go to subsidize our insurance companies. It sounds like this room full of people needs to contact their legislators. Josh LaRocque feels that one way or another we are going to have to pay. Sarah Chevalier asked Walt to confirm or deny that AmCare was going up for sale – absolutely not. He has been here for 26 years and has been the owner the entire time, AmCare is not for sale. He absolutely plans to be here for the foreseeable future as long as his heart keeps going. Sarah also asked if either service has had complaints after a call that they did not respond properly. Walt said sometimes people will call regarding billing and want verification. Chief Stell said they also have those types of calls and have had discussions with people regarding procedures they had seen on television and those types of discussions. Neither could recall an incident that involved poor care, but how care was delivered, yes. Fernand Gagne wanted to hear how each of the board members feel about the issue. Chris said he came into this hoping it would be closer than it was. Looking at the towns around us that are paying much less per capita than we are, for example Sheldon is \$23.00 per capita and we pay \$29.00 per capita. Some towns with longer contracts with AmCare are in the teens per capita. Looking at MVR, they started as volunteer, went to a paid staff and also lost heavy rescue. We rely on mutual aid and our bill has never dropped. AmCare has showed complete professionalism through the process, MVR was the complete opposite. As a board member trying to do research and get info for taxpayers, he would expect professionalism at every turn. If MVR crew members display lack of judgement through this process, Chris questions what happens on a rescue call, and that scares him. For those reasons, his vote would be to not support MVR. Paulette did have some comments to share. When Chris brought up this topic, it could have been a very easy decision for her, as she lives 3.5 miles from the new Sheldon AmCare station, it's quality care and it's cheaper. It should be a "no brainer" but it's not that simple, but comes back to response time. Two members of this board live as far away from MVR as you can get, she is 7 miles from the MVR station and that doesn't take into account when night staff has to respond to the bay from the other side of the river. Paulette was interrupted by Ashley Chevalier, an MVR

member who is not a Highgate resident. Paulette asked for respect when she was talking, as she has respected others when it was their turn to speak. This is an example of what Chris was speaking of. They were asked to do a job and they are doing it. Paulette questions sometimes why she is even sitting where she is, she really wonders. And yes, we have an open seat. It is hard to get somebody to step up to the plate in this atmosphere, as opposed to supplying the information and having a civil meeting. This is an emotional topic, she agrees with everyone on that. It comes down to response time, and she could be selfish on behalf of her constituents on her end of town, but it's also about quality of care. The bottom line is quality of care, what would we do without an ambulance in our community? Chris did not feel it was fair for the rest of their board to voice their opinion as it would appear to be a vote. David Rouse said that there are people that would like to serve on the board and can't because of their jobs. With his job it would be a years worth of paperwork to make it happen. Lori Olds stated she would also be interested but can't because she is busy with rescue. David also said that there are approximately 100 employees who wear bullet proof vests with Customs and Border Patrol based in Highgate. They are much closer to MVR and if he is shot he wants the closest service to save him. They need the best service they can get, and Mr. Rouse also stated his family has been here for five generations. Henry Rainville asked about the possibility of another satellite facility for AmCare. The board has talked about it with Mr. Krul in negotiations, and would like to go that route. It would be up to AmCare in that case, but Chris said he would be committed to making it happen if AmCare is chosen. Henry commended the board for what they do. He hopes he did not come across at town meeting as not being supportive of the board, and if he did, that's not the case. He asks a lot of questions, does his homework and knows the board does theirs. Eric Bessette asked where AmCare's second ambulance would roll out of if needed. Walt said if there is not another unit locally it comes from St. Albans. The response time from St. Albans is 10.8 minutes to the center of Highgate, and MVR is approximately 8 minutes. Mr. Bessette disagreed with these numbers. Heidi asked MVR to speak more about the social media posts and threats posted by an MVR employee and how they planned to deal with it. Chief Stell said they have already started dealing with this and will do so appropriately and swiftly, acknowledging that it was unprofessional and won't be tolerated or condoned. Heidi asked him to clarify what "swiftly" means to which Chief Stell answered they have a board meeting coming up and disciplinary policies will be followed. David Rouse asked who would be called for back-up, for example if there was an accident at Route 78 and Airport Road near the John Deere dealership. Walt confirmed they would call the closest ambulance in a situation such as that. Henry Rainville is not aware of the FaceBook situation and asked if the information was forwarded to the appropriate people to be dealt with – yes, it was. Kelly Rainville asked why an advisory vote had not taken place prior to town meeting day. This conversation has crossed over with different board members, which did slow up the process some. We had budgeted in advance of even having AmCare's numbers, so there is more than enough to cover either service in our budget. Kelly questions if the board is looking to change service providers or if they are trying to find a way to cover the \$400,000.00 that was taken out of the CIP. Josh LaRocque is new to the board, and the first thing that caught his eye was the MVR line item. It's our biggest expenditure and he was surprised by the amount that we pay. Josh is learning a lot being on the board. Chris said there are two separate issues, we have work to do with the \$400,000.00 number. It could have been cut in half and we would have been on a good track. The huge reduction undid all the work the Planning Commission had done over the previous year. Henry said it's no secret it was his motion that cut the CIP by \$400,000.00 at town meeting, he felt it should have been presented without a tax implication. All the work hasn't gone away, it's there, but better communication is needed to get back to where we should be. David Rouse would like the CIP to be a separate article next year. Shelley checked into it, and it can be. Chris agrees, communication is hard, how do we reach all the people, all age groups and areas of town effectively? \$17,000.00 was budgeted and we do have a new digital sign coming so that should help communicate with people and other ideas are welcome, please let the board know. There will be a community open house on September 20<sup>th</sup> with more information to follow. Lori Olds said that the MVR figures were presented to the board. Years ago the information was more detailed and asked if that is something they want MVR to supply again. Chris said we have what we need, but we did not have it when they were trying to budget. Lori feels that AmCare can offer a less expensive option because they do more transports. Lori said MVR is not a business, they are a

family and they are defensive because it is their livelihood. She does not plan on going anywhere. Lori bring up a good point, Chris said as they did the comparison, the EMS world as whole is a very tight group. He does understand the passion, but the board has to look at what is best for the community as a whole. MVR doesn't blame Walt for anything, he is trying to run a business. Rebecca Howrigan spoke that this is business and that the board is elected to gather the information on behalf of the taxpayers and make the best decision possible. She did not vote people in for the Selectboard to have compassion, she wants them to make good business decisions. And part of a business decision involves not only financials but quality of care. She doesn't think that compassion should be part of their decision. Chris used the example of escalating trash hauling costs and having to have a conversation with his hauler and switching to a different service even though it was not an easy switch to make. We as a town have to get through this process. Katie Davis asked if anyone on the board has any personal or family relationships with anyone on either of these squads – all answered no. Fernand Gagne asked about coverage at Franklin County Field Days. MVR has always covered the event onsite for them. Walt answered that they too would provide coverage on site for the five day event. Sarah Chevalier had more questions about mobile coverage with AmCare and how that works. The trucks are constantly on the move in different locations, the hospital, nursing homes, and on the interstate a lot, so all their trucks are in different areas at all times. Crews will stage mid-point if needed for the far reaches of the coverage area. Matt Depatie asked how many trucks are in Sheldon right now – none, but they will be full time in Sheldon as soon as this Friday possibly. Eric Chevalier wonders what Shelton tax payers think of AmCare now also covering Highgate. Mary Roy asked if there was a higher cost for AmCare vs. MVR with regard to mutual aid coverage – no, it would be the same. Randy Connelly asked both organizations about turnover rates with crew members. Walt stated that EMS has a higher than average turnover rate and tends to be a younger persons occupation for the most part. AmCare turnover is estimated at 10-15% and MVR stated their turnover rate has been low over the past few years, approximately 1.5%. Lori Olds asked how AmCare being mobile all the time can be cost effective. Walt stated it isn't always cost effective. Lori would also like a town survey to be done. David Rouse wanted to mention that the fire department budget this year includes money for stipends to the HVFD members which has never been done before. It is part of their new bylaws that they will be compensated, so it's in their budget. David feels that most members don't want the stipend and that those funds could make up the difference we are discussing tonight. Nancy Flint stated she believes there should be some kind of community vote if they are looking for the consensus of the people. Chris said we have kicked this can down the road for too long and a decision has to be made. Historically, we don't get good turnout at town meeting or at special Selectboard meetings. Tonight we do have a good turnout, but people still do not show up because they don't want to feel attacked. Chris has only received one email in support of MVR and 25 in support of switching and saving taxpayer dollars. Nancy Flint said she does not have to email anyone, she is here tonight. David Rouse commented that his work schedule does not allow him to attend a lot of meetings, he would like to see more things on the weekends. Paul Gagne commented that it sounds to him like the petition is what the people want, although he did not see or sign the petition. Chris noted that when they met with Chief Stell there were no long term contracts offered and the price was the price. Paul hopes that MVR doesn't go away totally and leave only one service in our area. Chris wants to wrap up this conversation in the next five minutes, but took a few more questions / comments. Keith Ploof is 59 years old and has been going to town meeting since he was 10 years old. There was always a separate article on the warning regarding Missisquoi Valley Rescue. Keith understands, from talking with Tom Racine, that it was a Selectboard decision to take that article out and include it all within the general fund. Chris isn't sure, it was before his time on the board. Henry Rainville addressed the question, as he was on the board at that time. Tom brought it to the board's attention because it was a contract that we did not have a contract for and we were spending money without a contract. Because it is a contractual decision, it was the Selectboard's decision at that time to change it. Lori Olds asked how many towns AmCare covers with their six trucks – they cover five. Lori also asked about transports. Katie Davis did not get an opportunity to sign the petition, so if the board was considering looking at it, she would like to move towards Wendi and sign it. Chris would like to decide tonight because looking back, this meeting should have taken place back in December when the other hearings took place. Chris personally wants this to be voted on one way or another and move forward,

as there are a lot of things that this is detracting them from doing in the town. Randy's only problem with the petition is it does not lay out any facts, when you read it, it sounds like they aren't even looking at another service. He doesn't know how much information people really had going into signing it. Shelley Laroche added that as treasurer she did not sign it because the voters are signing something that involves a 2% yearly increase, and the voters have no say in MVRs budget, their expenditures or their costs. She doesn't see how it's even legit, because there is no contract associated with the petition. David Rouse asked if Highgate taxpayers could be part of MVRs board – no, you need to be an MVR member. Jim Maskell signed it because he wants to go with MVR. Randy doesn't think it reads that way at all. Chris added we were never given a three year contract with a 2% increase, so how can this even be legit if the offer was never presented. The petition does read that way, but no contract was ever presented to the board. Keith explained that he collected a lot of those signatures and the comparison chart was also showed to the voters. Randy did not see the comparison chart data when he saw the petition. Chris Uzell said the chart was not emailed over to them with the petition when it was sent to them to post in the store (Desorcies). Josh Ramsdell, Richford resident and MVR board member, stated that the offer was on the table to the town of Highgate to contract with MVR in the amount of \$100,800 for three years with a 3% increase and that MVR had discussed it at their board meeting. The Selectboard strongly disagreed with that statement and informed Mr. Ramsdell that he is not a resident of Highgate and therefore cannot speak at this hearing. Mr. Ramsdell demanded to be heard because he serves this town.

Motion by Chris Yates that the Town of Highgate contract with AmCare for \$81,305.00 and sign a three year contract. The motion was seconded by Paulette Tatro. By voice vote the Ayes (2) were Paulette Tatro & Randy Connelly, and No (1) Josh LaRocque. Chris Yates, Chair, did not vote due to the fact that the board is currently at four members and could have ended in a tie. By a vote of 2 – 1, the motion **PASSES**.

Eric Bessette shouted from the back of the room that he would be running for Selectboard next year. Mr. Bessette was reminded that there is an open seat now. Josh Ramsdell continued to express frustration as he approached the Selectboard table after their decision, making sure they were aware that he has immediate family members that reside in Highgate.

*The Highgate Selectboard continued with the remainder of their regular Selectboard Meeting.*

**D. Treasurer updates – Shelley Laroche**

1. Check warrants & Finance Committee updates  
There were questions on the Xerox invoice, which is our monthly land records invoice. Shelley gave an update on the Finance Committee who met on 4/4/16 and the general fund was successfully balanced.

**E. Public Works updates – Andy King**

Andy was not present for this portion of the meeting, but did submit a list of items to be brought up and discussed.

- Hanna Road guardrail – We have received a written complaint on this and it has been discussed previously. Andy has gotten two quotes, FR Lafayette \$12,998.00 and VT Recreational \$9,000.00. VT Recreational can start right away and can take payment when we have the funds. Our current line item can't cover the full cost, but both firms are willing to take half now and half in our next budget cycle, which starts in July. Motion by Chris Yates to sign the contract with VT Recreational for \$9,000.00 for the needed guardrails on Hanna Road. The motion was seconded by Randy Connelly – **APPROVED**. It is noted that Paulette abstained from this decision.
- Paint the loader – Four vendors were contacted, but only TDI provided an estimate to sandblast the loader and repaint it to extend the life of it. Andy has everything on record of the other vendors being contacted. This quote will include the entire loader, bucket, frame, rims, everything. We have money in the equipment maintenance fund for this, and the price from TDI is \$6,699.52. Motion by Chris Yates to hire TDI to sand blast and paint the loader for \$6,699.52. The motion was seconded by Josh LaRocque – **APPROVED**. It was noted that the invoice will need to be adjusted to remove the tax and Shelley will send them the necessary forms. The work will be done ASAP, Chris is unsure how long the work will take. We will hold off on the work until after the roads are swept this spring.

- JP Sicard request for staging area – JP Sicard has been awarded the contract to work on the rail trail and they need a staging site in town to bring material to. The site is on Transfer Station Road by where MAHA used to park the trailers. We have used this as an offsite activity site when the Route 78 paving project was done. He has also been in contact with the contractor regarding the area of St. Armand Road by the railroad tracks. We are hoping that area can be lowered 16-18” so it will be smoother and have a better site line. The fill being stored could be used for St. Armand Road and would be coming anywhere from along the rail trail between Sheldon and Swanton. Randy asked if it would be clean fill. Any damage or wear and tear to the Transfer Station Road will be repaired by the contractor, the town won't incur any costs. Henry Rainville agrees, that hump on St. Armand Road needs to be addressed. JP Sicard will be working with the state to do that work and no paving would be done in the St. Armand Road area until afterwards. Motion by Chris Yates to have Andy King, Public Works Director, sign the offsite submittal for VTrans for JP Sicard to utilize the site on Transfer Station Road. The motion was seconded by Paulette Tatro – **APPROVED**. Josh added that MAHA is looking to get rid of those trailer soon. MAHA owns the trailers and will be putting them up for sale. They were purchased to transfer equipment donated by Sticks & Stuff. Paulette also asked for a time frame, which will be this construction season.

**F. Town Clerk updates – Wendi Dusablon**

- Motion by Chris Yates to approve the minutes from the executive session meeting on March 17, 2016 as written. The motion was seconded by Paulette Tatro – **APPROVED**.
- Motion by Chris Yates to approve the minutes from the regular Selectboard meeting on March 17, 2016 as written. The motion was seconded by Randy Connelly – **APPROVED**.
- As of the deadline of April 1<sup>st</sup>, we had licensed 538 dogs. Late notices went out on April 4<sup>th</sup> and as of today we have licensed 556. Vonnie (ACO) and Ben (Constable) will get involved in the month of May as municipal tickets will be issued in addition to licensing fees.
- Paulette asked about Kraft Hockeyville. The nomination period ended on March 11<sup>th</sup> and the top ten hockey communities will be announced on April 9<sup>th</sup>.

**G. Town Administrator – Heidi Britch Valenta**

- Update on East Highgate Dam removal – The Northern Forest Canoe Trail has received a \$10,000.00 grant from the watershed fund so they will be moving forward with the long needed removal of the dam to improve boater safety. The project should go out to bid very soon and the Swanton Village utility will be assisting with that.
- Household Hazardous Waste Day in Highgate May 7<sup>th</sup> – We have a request from the NWSWD to hold a household hazardous waste collection event in Highgate and it is included in our membership with the district. May 7<sup>th</sup> from 8am – 2pm on Transfer Station Road by the sand shed. Henry Rainville inquired about tire disposal. Motion by Chris Yates to approve the date of May 7<sup>th</sup> for the HHWD event with NWSWD from 8am – 2pm at the sand shed. The motion was seconded by Paulette Tatro – **APPROVED**. May 7<sup>th</sup> is also Green Up Day and bags are available now at the town clerk's office.
- Painting the purlins @ the arena bids – an RFP was issued for painting of the purlins. The due date was Friday, April 1<sup>st</sup> and we have two sealed bids that Heidi would like the board to open tonight so she can circulate the information to the Arena Construction Committee prior to their meeting on April 11<sup>th</sup>.

*Guilmette's Handyman Services*

*\$13,381.00 for the project and to add on the last 6 bays and 5 bents would be an additional \$23,381.00.*

*Gosselin Construction & Excavation*

*\$13,500.00 for the project and to do the whole job this year the total cost would be \$24,300.00 and we would be receiving the end beams and one set of bents at no cost.*

Sarah Chevalier asked for clarification on what purlins are, they are the large beams that hold up the roof. Per our structural engineer, this needed to be done in the next few years to get ahead of any surface rust and prolong the life of the purlins. The committee is also working on bids to replace the bleachers, and those bids are due on Friday, April 8<sup>th</sup>, as well as a ventilation RFP that will be going out soon. Randy asked if the dehumidifier issues have been dealt with – yes, that is in progress. The dehumidification system will also assist with rust not forming on the purlins.

- Hungerford Brook Project – A letter of support is being requested for this ecosystem restoration grant. Chris read aloud from the request for a letter of support. Motion by Chris Yates to sign a letter of support for the Hungerford Brook Watershed Project. The motion was seconded by Randy Connelly – **APPROVED.**
- Misc. – Jeff Towle asked if there were any updates on the FNLC project at the boat launch in Highgate Springs. Denise Smith (FNLC) mentioned to Heidi today that their application was denied and now the town is working on an application through Better Back Roads and Jim Smith is working on a design.

#### **H. Selectboard items**

- Henry Rainville asked if anyone had seen the article in the Messenger from Carolyn Branagan about taxes vs. fees. He wants the board to consider these when we are speaking about the arena. It is a good article that explains the difference. He is asking the board to read it, inform themselves and consider it. It is a very well written article that was recently in the Messenger (possibly Monday).

#### **I. Upcoming Events**

April 11	6pm	Arena Phase II Committee Mtg. @ arena
April 14	6pm	DRB MTg.
April 18	7pm	Republican Caucus Mtg.
April 19	6pm	Planning Comm. & Sidewalk Comm. Mtg.
April 20	6pm	Highgate Historical Society Mtg. @ Municipal Bldg.
April 21	7pm	Selectboard Mtg.
April 25	5pm	ADA Study Comm. Mtg.
May 7		GREEN UP DAY – bags are available now at the town clerk's office
May 7	8am-2pm	Household Hazardous Waste Day – Transfer Station Rd. sand shed
Sept. 20		Municipal Open House – ADA Study Results

**DOG LICENSES WERE DUE ON OR BEFORE APRIL 1<sup>ST</sup>. FEES ARE NOW \$20.00 SPAY / NEUTERED OR \$24.00 NOT SPAY / NOT NEUTERED**

#### **J. Executive Session**

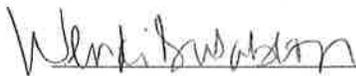
Motion by Chris Yates for the Selectboard to enter into executive session with the Town Administrator @ 10:01pm to discuss a pending real estate transaction where premature public knowledge could put the town at a severe disadvantage. The motion was seconded by Paulette Tatro – **APPROVED.**

Motion by Chris Yates to exit executive session @ 10:17pm. The motion was seconded by Josh LaRocque – **APPROVED.**

#### **K. Adjournment**

Motion by Chris Yates to adjourn the meeting @ 10:17pm. The motion was seconded by Paulette Tatro – **APPROVED.**

Respectfully submitted by,



Wendi Dusablon, Highgate Town Clerk

Minutes approved by,



Christopher Yates, Chair – Highgate Selectboard