

ST. GEORGE SELECT BOARD & ASSESSORS

St. George Town Office

MEETING MINUTES

January 23, 2023 - 7p.m.

The Select Board meeting was called to order at 7:00 p.m. Present were Richard Bates (Chair), Randy Elwell, Steve Cartwright, Van Thompson, Wayne Sawyer, Richard Erb, Irene Ames, Susan Ellis, Scott Vaitones, David Percival, and Chris Williamson.

Present via Zoom were Loreen Meyer, Jane Conrad, and Amy Drinkwater.

REGULAR SESSION

Public Comment

There were no public comments.

Adjustments to the Agenda

Status of Tax Acquired Properties was added to the Old Business Discussion Items.

The order of the agenda was updated, moving the 2Q Financial Review to the beginning of the agenda, followed by Town Manager's FY24 Budget Presentation.

Conflicts of Interest

There were no conflicts of interest.

2Q Financial Review

Bates

Are there things that you want to raise with the Select Board that we might be able to help with?

Susan Ellis

We need to clarify some items with Irene. Some of them were about carry-forwards. There's less mileage in the Town Office. By and large, we are in quite good shape. Once Irene sends me the rest of the answers, I can forward them to the Select Board, which would be clarifying.

Bates

If the Board is okay with it, why don't we leave it like that? We'll wait for Susie's responses from Irene. Then we could just finish and close this out.

Susan Ellis

We're very happy.

Bates

That is great. I'm glad we're meeting the budget numbers that Rick predicted. That's great.

Town Manager's FY24 Budget Presentation

The next financial item is the Town Manager's Budget Presentation for next year. I did mention this to the Budget Committee earlier. Rick is going to present his draft and explain the significant issues. We may have some general questions on this, but we're not going to get into the details. Next meeting on February 6th, after we've had two weeks to study this budget proposal, we can go through the details in approximately half of the departments, and on February 27th, we'll go through the other half. On March 13th, we'll finalize and vote on all the sections. I hope the Budget Committee will be following along and hopefully we won't be too far out at that stage. I'll send a note out to everybody with the proposed order in which we'll take the departments. Rick, tell us about the budget that you sent out this afternoon and your background and thoughts behind it.

Erb

Sure. I'm happy to be able to send you something today that you can take a look at, but I would agree that now is probably not the time to get into any depth on it. It does show a significant increase and we will need to address that. There had been discussions with the Budget Committee, and something that I

brought up was use of what might be considered more like “one time money” to bridge the gap to phase in what will probably be longer term increases and try to make it a less abrupt change and less abrupt increase. We are blessed that the town has a relatively high fund balance. It used to be called unappropriated surplus in the old days. We are above the level of fund balance recommended; it's nice to have more than enough. There certainly are people who would say, if you keep too high of a fund balance, you're really using other people's money. It is a tool that we could use. We also have around \$270,000 in ARPA funds, which the town is authorized to use basically for any legitimate town service that we provide. That will be another approach. If you look through the proposal, you can see that bringing the ambulance in as a town department is going to have a significant effect on the town's overall budget. I hope we will spend some time on that. I want to thank the ambulance department, and Amy in particular, for providing me with the information. This is a little different for us as we don't have the detailed history of expenditures and revenues that we normally do, because we were providing support, but not being actively involved in the management of the ambulance. I appreciate everything that they've been able to provide to me and look forward to seeing more. Overall, one of the areas of concern would be what we do with town wages and town salaries. The personnel policy adopted by the Board does call for us to use the Consumer Price Index as our guideline for cost-of-living adjustments. By my calculations, that was 7.1% for the period. If you look through the recommendations in my proposed budget, that basically is the standard. There are a handful of situations that I thought required something more than that. I'm hoping that we will be able to support the CPI increase, as the policy calls for. As you can see, for the gross budget, we're looking at almost an 18% increase. I'm hoping that can be brought down. It does not take into account increased revenues, which will partially offset that, but we are still looking at a larger tax increase than we have seen in a very long time here. I feel like we have our work cut out for us and I'm really eager to get some other opinions on this because I've been staring at these numbers for a month or two now. It will be helpful to have somebody speak up and give me some suggestions as well. I'll look forward to that. Basically, a lot of what you will see in that proposed budget is managing what we have. We're trying to maintain the level of services that we enjoy now and that's what the proposal calls for. We have projects around the town that do not impact the general fund budget. We will be opening bids soon on the project in Port Clyde at the waterfront. We have trails that are being upgraded. We have engineering studies on rising waters and climate change. We have numerous projects in the works, but they do not call for general fund monies for the most part, so they don't impact it. Beyond that, I'm happy to answer any questions people have or any suggestions you have on how we proceed from here.

Bates

Thank you, Rick. Does anyone have any questions at this stage on Rick's proposed budget or shall we just spend the next two weeks going through these numbers, so we can resume on February 6th?

Randy Elwell

Are the hard copies at the office Rick?

Erb

Yes, I have one right here. I'm happy to photocopy it and put it in everybody's mailbox.

Randy Elwell

Or just email it to me and I can print it out. Whatever is easier. Just let me know.

Erb

You may be able to work from what was sent out this afternoon, so if you haven't seen it yet, that would be why.

Bates

The page on the ambulance was actually quite hard to read. I don't know if that can possibly be rotated 90 degrees, and then it would be a bit larger print.

Wayne Sawyer

I would like a hard copy of it. I'll pick it up.

Bates

Well, thank you Rick. I think the thing we all agree on is this is what it takes to have a first-class service. Unless we hear differently from the townspeople, I think that's what we should be aiming to do.

Erb

Richard, I would add that as I was going through the budget process, I kept in mind how strong the support is for the ambulance and what people want us to be spending money on. We are doing our best to maintain the really high level of service that they've enjoyed, because that's what people expect of us.

Status of Tax Acquired Properties

Bates

Shall we move on? I mentioned the Budget Committee might be interested in Rick's comments about the status of tax acquired properties. Rick, would you mind jumping to that? I know, it's something that you've been working on for a while and you even spoke to Bill Kelly recently about that. Please give us an update on that.

Erb

This will be a little anticlimactic, but I am going to ask if we can continue that discussion next meeting. With Irene having been out Friday and all of us out on Monday, I really don't have the up-to-date figures that I hoped I would have.

Bates

Of course. The budget committee is going to be joining us for the next few meetings so they can get it then. Thank you, Rick.

Erb

What I will say is that we do have people who are making regular payments or partial payments on a regular basis and some who are not, and I'll talk about that.

Plans to Create Town Ambulance Department

Bates

Let's move on. Rick has already alluded to his working with Amy and her getting him all the numbers. This was on the agenda, mostly to give a status report on where we are now and where we're heading, which I think is towards a special town meeting on February 23rd so that we can form the Ambulance Department and approve the necessary Memorandum of Agreement on the transfer. Rick or Amy, do you want to give us a summary of where we are now on the plans to create the department, please.

Erb

I can update you on what I went over with Bill Kelly, which was very helpful. He has some experience with this very issue, having done it with small towns, Liberty most recently. He's familiar with the process and there are a lot of steps. You need state approvals, and there are various specific notices that have to be put out. I'm hoping that at our February 6th meeting, we'll be able to make some real progress. On Friday afternoon, I did receive from Bill, an updated asset transfer agreement, which I'll be able to share with all of you. I do want to make sure that it goes out to Amy and Tim and John. I'll do that tomorrow morning. It's fairly lengthy, and much of it is boilerplate. We should be ready to discuss that at the Select Board meeting on February 6th, and the Fire and Ambulance Association will have it as of tomorrow, so you'll have an opportunity to comment. What we need from the association is a list of assets. I know they're working on that, as well as known liabilities. We also have a state approval that needs to be granted, specific ads that need to be placed, and tax clearances stating that the State is not owed tax money from the Association. Some of these items don't need to be in hand until we actually close on the agreement but in order to go into a special town meeting, we do need to have the Asset Transfer Agreement in hand, and a list of assets. That's the pressure at this point and there's a time crunch here. Another thing that has come up and I don't know if Amy is in a position to talk about this, is the concern about the ambulance running out of money in this fiscal year. A suggestion was made to me when I met with the Executive Board and I think that there is interest in being able to use a special town meeting to appropriate funds, if necessary, to get us through until June 30th. I don't have an amount at this point. I think it would be relatively simple to do. Amy, can you comment on that at all.

Amy Drinkwater

That's what we were talking about at the meeting. With the fundraising, billing, etc., I think we have \$80,000 left. When we looked at it with salaries and the taxes, we would run out before the town meeting, because we've used most of our savings and for the last couple of years with COVID and everything else, we haven't done a lot of fundraising.

Van Thompson

Is this something that we might take up with the ARPA funds?

Erb

That was suggested. The reason I might prefer using the fund balance is I know that there are restrictions on using ARPA funds and giving them to nonprofits. It can be done but there will be some oversight required. I think it might be cleaner to use ARPA funds for our own services and use the fund balance for the ambulance.

Van Thompson

I didn't know whether it could be used as part of the transfer.

Erb

We can talk about it.

Susan Ellis

Amy, do you know how much and when?

Amy Drinkwater

I was crunching numbers on Sunday, when Rick was in and getting some information from QuickBooks. Looking at the last couple of months of payroll, it will be between \$70K and \$90K.

Susan Ellis

Two months?

Amy Drinkwater

Yes.

Susan Ellis

Sixty days and up to \$90,000.

Amy Drinkwater

Yes.

Susan Ellis

We could take that from the fund balance, and it would be much cleaner than using anything else.

Amy Drinkwater

Okay.

Susan Ellis

We have \$50,000 that we can move, right?

Erb

Which \$50,000 is that is that? Is that the Colby money?

Susan Ellis

No, it's the "just in case" money.

Bates

We changed the policy to allow us to move between departments. This is a little bit different.

Susan Ellis

We don't have a department yet, but we would be moving it to social services, which is where the ambulance is.

Bates

You could argue it like that. Let me check on it. I think you're right; the limit is \$50,000.

Susan Ellis

It won't be enough, but it would be a smaller hit to the fund balance right away.

Bates

Right. Thank you, Susie. I'll check on that. Do we have other questions to Rick or to Amy about the status of the creating the ambulance department?

Jane Conrad

Can you just remind us of what the timeline is for the Ambulance Department? I know when the decision is but some of these other things that Bill Kelly said need to be done and an outline of the chronology.

Amy Drinkwater

To become a department of the municipality, thirty days prior to switching over, we must put a notice in the newspaper and allow anybody that we serve to make comment to Maine EMS. We have already written that up. It needs to be on our letterhead and be in the paper. I've already sent that to Maine EMS

to review. If we vote in February, then we must make sure it's in the paper by May, so that we have a little extra time to have them come out to inspect us. They have to go through all of our equipment even though we're already licensed. They need do that because we're actually a different license as a municipality. Those steps must be done prior to us being licensed on July 1st, as a different department or as a department of the town. Those are the steps that we have to do as licensure for EMS for the State of Maine.

Jane Conrad

That a vote would be taken at this public meeting on February 23rd, is that what you're thinking Richard?

Bates

That's the recommendation that Bill Kelly has come up with because if you remember Jane, we were originally thinking of leaving this until May 8th, and having a vote on it May 9th. The complications of going that route are the uncertainties of having to prepare two budgets and so on. As Bill pointed out, if we can get everything accomplished in February, then we will know what the budget is that we're going to be proposing to the public and we will know what that budget will be on March 16th. Things will be a whole lot easier. On that February 23rd evening, we will have a public discussion of this, and then we'll have the vote to decide on the Memorandum of Agreement. There'll be the vote to form the department and then subsequently, when the Budget Committee discusses the budget for next year, on March 13th, hopefully it will be approved by the Budget Committee and the Select Board.

Jane Conrad

Would it be effective July 1st?

Bates

Yes. The intention is that it would be effective as of July 1st,

Jane Conrad

I guess that's my only question. At the last meeting I attended where we discussed this, when we were thinking we'd have a public hearing. All of us, obviously are clearly aware of the need for this and very supportive of this. My question is whether the general populace is well enough informed to be making a decision as soon as February 23rd.

Bates

We could certainly have another public meeting two weeks before that on Thursday, February 9th, and put the word out and just advertise it in the paper like we did for the December 1st meeting. What does the board think about having an additional public meeting?

Randy Elwell

I honestly don't think we're going to get any more people than before.

Cartwright

I don't think people are troubled over it and I don't think there's opposition out there. You always want to give the public a chance to weigh in, but it seems like we've already done that.

Jane Conrad

How many people need to come on February 23rd to vote for this for it to pass?

Erb

There is no quorum.

Jane Conrad

It's no big deal. If all of us who support it show up, then we're all set.

Bates

I don't want to sound too cynical about it. On May 9th, at the town meeting, people will have a chance to vote on the budget. It's possible, I suppose, that people may not agree to appropriate the full amount for the budget for the ambulance department or in fact, there may be enough people who don't want to do it at all. If that should happen, then it will be necessary to have a standby motion to figure out what we would need to transfer to the Ambulance Association as an alternative. I will just reiterate what I said earlier, for a given level of service, this is what it costs.

Van Thompson

I've spoken with a couple of people who mentioned they are surprised because they didn't think the service was that busy. I think part of it is just a matter of getting out the information about the demand that's there and what has occurred in the last several years to justify it prior to that meeting.

Randy Elwell

Amy, have you gone to Village Soup, to have an article written about what's going on?

Amy Drinkwater

I talked to Sarah. I also am finishing a PowerPoint presentation that has our numbers for the last three years, including the increase in calls and vaccinations in our community. Sarah said that she would put a link to the PowerPoint on our website in the newspaper. Hopefully, we'll have that out by the next board meeting.

Van Thompson

And in the Town Newsletter?

Amy Drinkwater

I can definitely do that.

Van Thompson

I think we need that prior to the meeting.

Amy Drinkwater

Okay.

Jane Conrad

I think the more information you provide to people, the more support you'll have and the more we'll have people ready on May 9th to support the budget. That's as important as the initial agreement.

Conflict of Interest

Bates

I have a conflict with the property stabilization application appeal, and I've asked Wayne to take the chair when we get to that part of the meeting.

Minutes

A motion was made by Cartwright, seconded by Thompson, to approve the Select Board Minutes dated January 9, 2023, as corrected, and by a 5-0 roll call vote, the motion carried, and the minutes were approved.

Communications

There were no communications.

Warrant

Irene is not here, and we don't have the paperwork, so I think that's something we're going to carry over until our next meeting.

Randy Elwell

Has it already been signed?

Bates

It has been signed. The checks will go out. It's just a matter of the oversight that the Board should have. When we meet in two weeks' time, we'll have four weeks' worth to check over.

Town Manager Report

Erb

The bid opening for the 10 Cold Storage project is on February 1st at 1pm, at the Town Office. You're welcome to be here if you're interested.

As I said earlier, I'll update you on the tax acquired property at the next meeting.

There was some discussion a little earlier about how heavy the snow was from the storm and indeed, when I talked with Stevie today, he said he could not move the snow on the sidewalks. We're using a home snowblower to clear our municipal sidewalks and when we get this kind of snow, it can't get through it. We will do the best we can. We may need to thaw out before we free those up.

Randy Elwell

I think we may have to put some sand and salt on them. We can only do what we can do.

Erb

That's where we're at right now. We would need a significant piece of equipment to clear the problem.

Cartwright

I have a problem with not clearing the sidewalks, but I certainly sympathize with what you're up against. I've seen people walking in the road and when it's dark, and it's scary.

Bates

Particularly when I see people walking, not facing oncoming traffic.

Randy Elwell

It might be something Jimmy can help us out with.

Bates

Do you think Jimmy could put some salt and sand down with his equipment?

Randy Elwell

He might have a piece of equipment that could help us.

Bates

A couple of years ago, there was a proposal that he had identified for some street equipment and sidewalk equipment, but we decided when we looked at the price that this was really more than St. George could afford.

Randy Elwell

For as much as we'd use it, Kirk Patrick Rental in Union might have something that the town could rent for the day. They're reasonably priced, and with the limited use, if we can rent it for a couple hundred dollars for the day, it's a lot cheaper than buying something.

Erb

We would do that in a heartbeat.

Bates

Something that would be higher powered than the unit that Stevie has at present. The sort of equipment that you see in in Rockland has a cab but when we looked at that earlier we just decided it was really more than we could afford.

Randy Elwell

We wouldn't use it that much. That's the problem.

Bates

That's right. Well, maybe there is something there that will work Rick.

Erb

Questions for Rick.

Randy Elwell

How are the roads holding up?

Erb

Pretty well. I thought things went smoothly today. Over the weekend, the storm was brutal.

Randy Elwell

The roads look good. They're doing a good job.

Erb

I thought so. For this storm, they did particularly well.

Committee Reports

Conservation Commission

Cartwright

Our Conservation Commission is cohosting a program with the South Thomaston Conservation Commission, on the woolly adelgid and brown tail moth, which are unwelcome visitors down the peninsula, that are making their way toward us. You may have seen it in the paper. It is at 6:30pm on January 31st at our Town Office. This meeting will have a zoom option. If you email stgcc@stgeorgemaine.com. The speaker will be Rebecca Jacobs of the Knox Lincoln Soil Water and Conservation District.

Planning Board 7:00pm January 10 Meeting

- The building permit application to stabilize the shoreland at 237 Long Cove Road was voted complete and, meeting the stabilization standards of the Shoreland Zoning ordinance and being already approved by the DEP and Army Corps, was approved.
- Upon further discussion with the applicant, the Board agreed that the zone designation for part of the Jones Brook subdivision requires correcting.

Community Resilience Committee

Bates

The Community Resilience Committee met on January 18th. Hannah Baroness from GMRI described the status of this NSF funded flood threshold project and earlier in the day she went around the town accurately measuring the vertical position of the tide sticks that we have set around town. The plan today was for Allison England and her students to make observations on the high tide because as you may have noticed, today was a very high tide. It is a king tide today. That's when the sun and the moon and the earth all line up, and at the same time, the moon is closest to the earth for the year. With the measurements I made today, the tide wasn't much lower than it was on December 23rd. Surprisingly, it is a big tide. Allison told me there was flooding at the CoOp, and there were high tides down at 10 Cold Storage Road. We'll see what the data is there, but this is all part of this flood threshold project that Hannah is working on, and so that's an interesting outcome. For another project, Meg Rasmussen went through her proposals for the Community Engagement Plans. This is for two projects we have. One is fixing the vulnerable municipal roads and the other project is the working waterfront water vulnerability study. Meg has been drawing up proposals for various community meetings that we need to have with the stakeholders, the general community, and others just to make sure that people know what's going on and have a say in what we need to do. The third item that came up at the Community Resilience

Committee meeting was the Jackson Memorial Library has submitted a grant application with Efficiency Maine, and The Nature Conservancy to install two level two electric vehicle chargers at the library for public use and today I learned that they received the grant so that's really good. For this grant application, they will receive 90% of \$7,283, which is the cost of putting in these two level two chargers. So that's a good news story if you have electric cars or are thinking about getting an electric car.

Shellfish Committee

Wayne Sawyer

We met and approved the next year's budget. The numbers are the same.

Property Tax Stabilization Application

Bates

Wayne, this is where I'd like you to take the chair, please because I want to make sure that there's no appearance of conflict of interest when I advocate for the applicant. Wayne, may I speak please?

Wayne Sawyer

You may speak.

Bates

Thank you. I'm advocating on behalf of George Hart. I believe he's eligible for this Property Tax Stabilization Program. While Hart has adequate records to satisfy three of the four eligibility requirements that we went through last meeting, he's four years short of the full records to show that he had a Maine residence for 10 years. He has been in St. George for six years and Irene is satisfied with that, but she needs evidence that Maine has been his primary residence for four other years. He claims that his residency exceeded those four years when he lived in the town of Levant in Penobscot County in the 1970s. Unfortunately, back in the 1970s, all the tax records that he had were lost or disposed of, so he doesn't have any tax proof of this. The town of Levant, which is a small town, no longer has any records of his residency, so how can he show that he meets this residency requirement? The Penobscot County Registry of Deeds shows that he and his wife did own a home from 1975 until 1982 but owning a home is not in itself proof that this house in Levant was his primary residence. What I circulated to you over the weekend are three letters that he gathered and sent to me, that I believe, are sufficient evidence that the Levant property was Hart's primary residence in the 1970s. Letter number one was from Dawn Tibideaux, who was Hart's wife at the time, and she confirmed that the Levant house was their primary residence. Letter number two comes from a friend of his, David King, who also attests the Levant house was Hart's full-time residence and visited it. The third letter was from a business partner and friend, John Bales, who confirms that Hart's residency was in Levant during that period. Advocating

for him on this I believe George is an honest chap, and I believe these three testimonial letters. I am asking you as the Town Assessors to consider this supplemental evidence that I've highlighted, to approve his application for the Property Tax Stabilization Program.

Cartwright

I am wondering about setting a precedent. I don't know George Hart at all, so I have no opinion one way or the other. Has he been denied by Irene or by our town staff?

Bates

Irene is going very strictly by the book. Hart was initially denied, because he met only three of the requirements with standard paperwork. He's 65, he's eligible for the homestead exemption, and he is a permanent resident of Maine. It's this issue of ten years of residency that Irene could not accept, although she accepts that he's had six years of residency in St. George. The issue is he cannot provide the normal method of residency, which for most people would be easy and his records from the 1970s are all gone. Hence, the appeal, which I'm calling supplemental evidence. It's not the same strict evidence that Irene would like to see and because it's supplemental, because it's nonstandard, then it becomes an appeal to the Assessors.

Van Thompson

I would point out, it's almost as if this is no fault of his own, relative to the fact that Levant does not hold records for that period of time.

Bates

Nor does St. George.

Cartwright

Suppose somebody came along who we didn't trust and got three of his buddies to say he lived here for ten years. In a sense, we're saying that would be acceptable.

Van Thompson

It's a matter of whether we trust the veracity of various people in our community.

Jane Conrad

You also have a deed showing that he owned property here then. It is not only based on hearsay of neighbors or ex-spouses, etc.

Bates

Ultimately, it could have been his second home. Steve, you put your finger on it. I think it is a matter of trust. I have known George Hart for several years. I think he's a decent chap. I think this was his

residency. I believe that. When I read this letter from his ex-wife, I felt that was a pretty good endorsement.

Van Thompson

And the business partner and the business are in Maine.

Cartwright

I wasn't questioning this particular case. I believe that he did live there in Levant. It's not a place where you'd have a summer house, but you could. I was just concerned about the precedent. Suppose somebody a little less trustworthy comes along and says they lived in Port Clyde, but don't have any records of it.

Van Thompson

Well, but I mean, can you show a deed? Can you show other things? This is us as the Assessors.

Cartwright

Richard, do we have the authority to do that?

Bates

Yes.

Erb

The Maine Revenue Service. Who do you appeal this to? The answer is your local Board of Assessors. I've asked about other town's approach to this and they're all over the place, as far as how much evidence they are requiring. I would dare say that they are not requiring a lot of evidence in many cases, but every town is different.

Cartwright

Do you Rick have a recommendation on this particular case?

Erb

I really don't. I guess a question I have is whether he has Maine state income tax records. Richard, do you know if he has anything?

Bates

No. It appears that during the time he was in Levant, he did not pay income tax to Maine. What he told me was he paid income tax to Massachusetts. He paid taxes but not to the state of Maine. Prior to 1975, he was working in Washington, for the federal government and he still had some contractual work in Massachusetts. He doesn't have Maine tax records from that period.

Randy Elwell

If he sued us, would his evidence stand up against us?

Bates

It's up to the Assessors to decide on this.

Bates

I personally feel from the testimonials that he's had from his business partner, from a friend and from his ex-wife, as well as the deed, that it would be credible.

On a motion made by Thompson, seconded by Elwell, the Board determined George Hart met the requirements for ten years of Maine residency, and by a 3-1 roll call vote, the motion carried. Chair Bates abstained from voting.

Application for Blind Persons Exemption from Local Property Taxes

Bates

We only have one other thing on the agenda. This is an application for a blind person's exemptions from property tax. Nancy Sherman from Port Clyde submitted an exemption for being blind. Our assessor's agent has looked at this and approved it. The exemption is worth \$4,000 times the certified ratio. The agent is asking for us is to approve this. It is MRSA section 654 and it's worth \$4,000 times the certified ratio.

A motion was made by Elwell, seconded by Cartwright, to approve the blind person's property tax exemption for Nancy Sherman, and by a 5-0 roll call vote, the motion carried.

A motion was made by Sawyer, seconded by Elwell, to adjourn the Select Board meeting, and by a 5-0 roll call vote, the motion carried, and the meeting was adjourned at 8:10p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Tammy Taylor

Recording Secretary

Town of St. George