

Town of Hawley, Massachusetts
Minutes of a
Selectboard / Board of Health / Zoning Board of Appeals Meeting
In Person & via Conference Call

April 25, 2023

Present: Will Cosby, Bob MacLean, Hussain Hamdan - Selectboard
Tinky Weisblat, Gal Friday
Virginia Gabert, Treasurer and Financial Administrator
Gary Mitchell, Chris Tirone, Georgette deFriesse, Kimberly Orzechowski,
and (via Zoom) Al Averill

The meeting was called to order at 7:03 p.m. Warrants and minutes from previous meetings were signed. Then:

- 1. The board spoke with Al Averill of the USDA and the American Farmland Trust.** Al said that he was retired from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service but was consulting for it. He had been charged with identifying all farmlands that could qualify for the NRCS's payment-designation program, which paid landowners to keep their land preserved for agriculture. (Half of the money would come from the USDA, and half from another source such as the state or a land trust.) The NRCS had identified some land in Hawley that was recognized by the federal and state governments; his task was to identify farmland and particularly soil of local importance. In order for a parcel of land to be eligible for this program, 50 percent of it had to be identified as arable. If the town was amenable, he explained, he would make a list of possible land to test and ask for help identifying the owners.

Hussain said that although he recognized the importance of farmland, Hawley already had a lower tax base than many towns due to so much of it being under state forest, or private preservation restrictions, and entities such as the states Agricultural Preservation Restriction program added to the problem. He stated his belief that the state or federal government should reimburse the town for lost tax revenue. Until that changed, he noted that he was hesitant to support programs that could cause more land to be taxed at reduced rates. Al suggested that much of the land was already in Chapter and that land would continue to be taxed as it currently was. He added that he didn't think there was a lot of land in Hawley where this could make a big difference. Hussain was skeptical and explained that this would render the restrictions (and tax breaks) permanent. Will said the board would need to think; Hawley had a lot of land in forest and APR already. Hussain reinforced his earlier point, noting that many people on fixed incomes in Hawley lived on small pieces of land with houses and therefore already paid proportionately more in taxes than some of their neighbors with more land. He suggested that the program would work better in the Connecticut River Valley which was more affluent and had much better farmland. Al said it was already being worked on in those areas as well. Will asked Al whether he had any idea how much acreage in Hawley might be eligible. Al replied that he didn't know and didn't want to start work on soil testing if the town were not on board. Will said that the board would take the matter under advisement. Al noted that agricultural commission chair Peter Mitchell had seemed to favor the proposal and promised to send Tinky the materials he had sent to Peter.

2. **Discussion moved to the Franklin Land Trust bike ride scheduled for Saturday, August 19.** Hussain said he had no objection as long as the land trust remembered the requests on previous occasions that riders pull over for emergency vehicles and otherwise act courteously and respectfully. Gary said he knew of no planned road closures on that day. Tinky was asked to write to the land trust with this information.
3. **The board moved on to scheduling a meeting with the Planning board about its draft ZBA site-plan review plan.** Kimberly Orzechowski of the Planning Board requested that the meeting be scheduled after Lloyd Crawford's upcoming trip. The group decided to schedule it during the regular Selectboard/ZBA meeting on Tuesday, June 6, at 7:30 p.m. Hussain noted that he approved of the open-ended nature of the proposed plan; Kimberly noted that the board had wanted to give the Selectmen leeway.
4. **Gary Mitchell and Chris Tirone were asked whether their working relationship had improved.** Both reported that they seemed to be doing "all right" together. Will told them that he had talked to John Sears of the Personnel Committee and that the two were hoping to engage a company that did consulting work with the Mass. Municipal Association on professional development. He said he had nothing concrete to report but hoped to engage this company to help Gary and Chris identify common goals and strengths. Hussain asked how communication between the two was progressing, and both cautiously said that they thought it was getting better.

In other business, Will asked the group to authorize Lloyd to consult a specialist in Charlemont about the plantings on the bank behind the town garage. Apparently, Lloyd believed that the plantings from perhaps six years ago (designed to prevent erosion) might not be doing their job. Will proposed that Lloyd find out how much analysis from this person would cost, and Hussain and Bob assented.

Tinky brought up the matter of the town cemeteries. She noted that Lark Thwing, currently in the hospital, had been the go-to person for identifying cemetery plots for the past few years. Unfortunately, Teresita Kapsinow was hoping to bury her husband Jay in the East Hawley Cemetery in a few weeks and needed to purchase a plot. Tinky said that she had spoken with John Sears of the Historical Commission, who was going out of town but had offered to look at the cemetery on his return with Brandon Root, a new member of the commission. (The board noted that the Town report did not accurately reflect the current committee membership; Brandon still had to be appointed officially.) Hussain noted that the state's GIS LIDAR system might help in identifying plots. Virginia reminded Tinky that the cemetery was fairly full. Tinky was tasked with identifying a likely plot to sell to Teresita; then Hussain could look at the GIS data and John and Brandon could look at the actual spot. Tinky noted that she didn't yet know whether she would need the road crew's help to dig a hole for the ashes; she would report back

Tinky shared a letter from the Foremost Insurance Group about reported damage to property on East Hawley Road. She was instructed to scan and send the letter to fire chief Greg Cox so he could determine whether he needed to take any action.

Hussain asked about the status of the file cabinets in the Town Office. Virginia reported that she believed that no new file cabinets were due to arrive, although town clerk Donna Lemoine was still looking for homes for some items. Will pointed out that the new file cabinet in front of Donna's desk could obstruct traffic both at the upcoming election and at Annual Town Meeting. Tinky was told to ask Donna to move it to the rear of the building and to ask whether she needed help in this task.

Will asked about the situation with the planters in front of the building. Tinky noted that she had received an offer to maintain them from Leslie Cooper and Lorraine McCarthy of West Hawley, although they could not get to work for a couple of weeks. Kimberly had offered to provide a seasonal wreath when the time came. In the meantime, Will asked the road crew to drill holes in the planters to facilitate drainage.

Will asked about the status of properties and auctions. Virginia said that the auctioneer was quite expensive; she therefore wanted to wait until all the possible properties had been acquired. Hussain said he had spoken to the tax title attorney and that it was possible that Bob Stone's property should be resolved within the next year. Will asked about the property across the street from the Town Office, owned by Jason and Regina Velazquez, an ongoing issue. Hussain opined that one possible good outcome would be for the landowners to sell the property to someone who would fix it up, although Tinky noted that they had seemed reluctant to do this in the past. Gary offered to fill the cellar hole on the property to minimize possible injury.

Hussain mentioned the attorney general's abandoned-property program; Tinky was asked to look into this for other properties in town, if not for Jason and Regina's former home. She was also asked to write to Jason and Regina asking them to come to an upcoming Selectboard meeting and report on their plans for their property.

Gary Mitchell had a couple of issues to bring up. One was the equipment shed in East Hawley, where the roof had sprung a serious leak, threatening the case of weights and measures inside. Will said that he would like to see the weights and measures go into the possession of the Sons & Daughters of Hawley at the Hawley Grove. Gary promised that if Will could get the Sons & Daughters' permission, the road crew would deliver the weights and measures to them.

Gary also said that the Sterling truck had some major issues and asked whether it should be fixed in the current fiscal year or the following year. Virginia asked him to get an estimate for repairs. He added that Ashfield Road was now open. The trees that had been marked for removal had been taken down, and Brandon Reynolds had carved a heart in a stump with a chainsaw. Tinky said she would mention the road opening in an upcoming newsletter and asked for a photo of the heart. Georgette deFriesse offered to take one.

Finally, Hussain asked Tinky whether she planned to organize another pudding contest in the near future. Tinky said that she didn't have time for all the work the contest would entail but said she would consider organizing a pudding party for 2024.

There being no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:28 p.m.

Respectfully submitted, Tinky Weisblat, Gal Friday

Williams Cosby

Hussain Hamdan

Robert MacLean