

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

February 14, 2023

Present: Will Cosby, Bob MacLean, Hussain Hamdan - Selectboard
Tinky Weisblat, Gal Friday

Virginia Gabert, Treasurer and Financial Administrator

Natalie Blais, Corinne Coryat, Gary Mitchell, Chris Tirone, Georgette deFriesse, Ken Bertsch,
Peter Beck, Wayne Lemoine, Ed Brady, Courtney Hoyt, Charlie MacLean, Suzanne Crawford,
Lisa Johnson, John Sears, Julie Carantit, Jeff Carantit, Peggy Travers,
and via Zoom Pamela Shrimpton and Kimberly Orzechowski

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

1. **Ken Bertsch presented a letter he had drafted to state officials on the issue of rural schools.** He said that he hoped the Selectmen would lend their support. The board members said they were all on board with the letter. They agreed to have Tinky draft a signature page on which they would endorse its message.

Ken noted that the Hawlemont budget hearing was scheduled for Monday, March 13, at 5 p.m. He explained that the budget would probably not be complete by then. He said that he couldn't answer many questions at present as he didn't have a final budget but added that he predicted a modest increase in the town's assessment.

2. **The board welcomed Hawley's new state Representative, Natalie Blais, and her assistant, Corinne Coryat.** Natalie explained that she tried to visit every selectboard in her 18-community district in order to discover what was on people's minds.

She handed out a summary of bills on which she was working, noting that most of them emphasized issues about which she had heard complaints: rural schools, transportation (both public and micro), and roads.

She said she was working on a bill that would look at the cost burden of rural roads (particularly unpaved ones) and devise possible solutions. She said she was also hoping to codify (make permanent) the Winter Recovery Assistance Program, which had been haphazard in the past. She noted that the biggest thing she was working on in the coming term was the rural-schools bill. She said she understood the need to increase rural-school aid.

In addition, Natalie noted, she was also working to establish an authority for municipal and public-safety buildings, noting that those structure often needed much more funding than individual towns could muster.

Will told her that that last project was dear to Hawley's heart, citing the town's desire to relocate the highway garage to a safer location, to enlarge the fire station, and to implement

other public-safety ideas. He mentioned that Hawley's roads were indeed extensive and that many of them were dirt. He referred to a request brought up at the last meeting by a resident asking the town to modify the plowing route for Labelle Road because it was often impassable. Will remarked that digital equity was also a major issue for Hawley as the town would like to make broadband more widely available.

He also referred to the enormous administrative and reporting costs associated with some of the grants that Hawley had in place or could apply for. He said that the town could use help with both grant writing and reporting. He mentioned Hawley's culvert issues. Natalie responded that culverts were a challenge she had already discussed with the governor and lieutenant governor as they began drafting their first budget.

As regulations increased, Will noted, the costs of implementing solutions to rural problems increased as well. Still, he said he liked the look of Natalie's bills.

Hussain returned to the issue of possible solutions for public-safety buildings. He said that the small size of the fire house didn't just make it impossible to park many more modern fire trucks inside; it also meant that the brush truck (which can access some difficult locations) had to be stored outdoors and therefore couldn't be kept at full readiness year round because the onboard water tank had to be drained in the winter. He added that the fire station could use a washroom and a training room.

Natalie said that committee assignments in the legislature were due the following week. She explained that being on a committee gave legislators a chance to educate big-city chairs of the committees about the needs of rural communities. She recalled that in the past year she had taken the head of the public-safety committee on a short tour of rural facilities and hoped to do this again, perhaps coming to Hawley.

Hussain explained that Hawley and surrounding communities have a dire need for regional paramedic-level ambulance service. He noted that calls increasingly require paramedics as the protocols change and the population ages, but most local services tend to be volunteer EMT-Basic. A regional level paramedic service was potentially viable, as shown by the examples of Highland and South County, he noted, but it would require significant funding to get off the ground; the towns could supply that funding alone.

Will told Natalie that PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes for state-owned land) was a major problem in Hawley as the state owned so much acreage in the Hawley State Forest. Natalie explained that she was hoping to introduce legislation that would change the formula for PILOT. She said the State had already increased some of the payments but wanted to do more. Will informed her that Hawley was currently responsible for maintaining the roads in the forest.

Will opened the floor up to questions. John Sears began the discussion by talking about vocational-school transportation for towns like Hawley that were not members of a vocational school district. He said that the towns got reimbursed for about five percent of vocational-school transportation costs. Natalie told him that the rural-school commission **proposals** she was backing could help. This was not just a rural issue, she pointed out: it affected approximately 100 communities in one way or another. John asked what the vocational-school committee could do to support her work, and he said she would call him soon.

Suzanne Crawford said that as a member of the Mohawk Trail School District committee she was grateful that Natalie had come.

Natalie told the crowd that she hoped Hawleyites would keep track of legislation, follow committee hearings online, and give input as they could

Jeff Carantit said that he had been having problems with the capacity of the power grid and the telephone wires near his home. He said that National Grid seemed unwilling to roll out stronger electricity in the area. Natalie encouraged him to get in touch with her office. Ken added that Hawlemont School had run into power-grid issues as well for the same reason. Will commented that this factor had actually put the brakes on some plans a few years back to install large scale solar power in Hawley, though in his opinion this might have been a blessing in disguise. Natalie said that she had been working on legislation that would involve grid modernization.

Ed Brady raised a public-safety concern about the length of time it took Hawleyites to get ambulance service. He asked about the status of ambulance service for Hawley. Hussain explained that the town now had a contract with Adams Ambulance Service to serve as the town's primary responder, with nearby towns continuing to provide mutual aid. He briefly went through the history of Hawley's relationship with the Charlemont ambulance service, which, he explained, had been unwilling to sign a contract with Hawley. Adams, he said, was charging the same yearly fee Charlemont had wanted and had signed a contract. He said the he believed that response time was about the same from Adams as from Charlemont (depending on where in Hawley an emergency took place) as Adams had more personnel, including paramedics; often, Charlemont crews had to wait for additional people before being able to help people.

Ed asked whether the town had considering allying itself with the Highland Ambulance Service. Hussain said that the Selectboard had spoken extensively with Highland, but that that service was already stretched thin in terms of personnel. Ed asked whether FRCOG could help with paramedics. Hussain replied that "fly cars" (on-duty paramedic units that responded to a scene and met a basic-level ambulance thereby upgrading its status), could be used, but that this system would necessitate significant funding, as well as licensure and management considerations. Ed suggested that perhaps FRCOG could help, and Natalie said she was talking to FRCOG about analyzing the situation.

Natalie introduced Corinne, who explained that she was the go-to person if Hawley had any home-rule petitions – that is, if legislation needed to be introduced on behalf of the town. Corinne also informed those in the room that she was the person to call for constituent services, that people should call on her if they needed help with the state.

The Selectmen thanked Natalie and Corinne for the visit. Tinky presented gifts from several Hawley entities, and the two went on their way.

3. **John Sears brought up the possibility of changing Hawley's preferred vocational school,** which was currently Franklin Tech. He explained that students who were accepted to both Franklin Tech and Smith Vocational were automatically slotted into Franklin Tech at present because the towns had assumed that the cost of transportation would be lower at the closer school.

At this point, however, he said, there was no financial advantage to the town in this arrangement so it would be beneficial to the students to designate both Franklin and Smith Vocational as preferred, allowing students to attend either. Hussain moved to make that change, Bob seconded, and all voted in favor

4. **Courtney Hoyt addressed the board about a recent accident.** She said she had tried reporting for duty as a firefighter on the morning of Saturday, January 21. She had gone to the Town Garage to meet the fire truck and had found a truck blocking the entrance, driven by Wayne Clark with an older man who might have been George Rice on a piece of machinery referred to as a loader. She alleged that they had blocked her exit from the building and had jeered at her, and a piece of equipment had ended up hitting her car as she tried to get out.

Hussain asked whether the accident had taken place in view of the cameras at the front of the garage. He offered to look through the camera footage with Gary Mitchell. Hussain also asked whether Courtney had filed a police report. She replied that she had not, although she had contacted her insurance company. Hussain asked Gary whether any town employees had been involved, and Gary said that no one from the town had been there that Saturday morning. He explained that Wayne often purchased sand from the town. Hussain noted that a while back the town had drafted a policy allowing local contractors to buy sand from the town at-cost, but his recollection was that town personnel had to be present at the salt shed and to load the sand as non-town personnel were not supposed to do this. The Selectboard told Courtney that members would get back to her about the camera footage.

5. **Tinky brought up a request from David Detmold of Montague, asking that Hawley adopt a resolution at the Annual Town Meeting** to ask the state to change its seal and flag, which many people deemed offensive. Hussain explained that Hawley had a petition procedure for citizens to place items on the warrant, requiring a petition by 10 registered voters. Tinky said she would explain this.

In other business, Virginia brought up a recent charge to an old debit card issued to town clerk Pamela Shrimpton. It was a small charge at Amazon.com, she explained, adding that Pam had told her that she had not used the card in years. Virginia said she wanted to institute a new practice that would require the Treasurer or a designee to notify the bank and approve all checks written. If the bank was presented with a check that is not pre approved, it would reach out to the Town for authentication. If the check was not approved by noon, it would be refused. Because of this, Virginia said she would like to have a secondary contact for the bank in case she was unavailable on the morning of a call. Hussain suggested that Tinky would be a good person for this as she was a town employee and the questions might touch on sensitive information. He also suggested that Pam might look at the purchase in case Amazon had accidentally billed the wrong card for it.

Tinky reminded the board that it needed to fill out a survey indicating what it would like to do with recent and upcoming opioid settlement funds. There wasn't a lot of money, she said, but it might help with something. Hussain said the funds could pay for some CPR training for emergency workers.

Tinky brought up a letter from the regional housing authority offering to extend its contract for one year while it and the town considered the future. Hussain asked her to scan the letter and the interim contract so that it could be considered at the next meeting.

Tinky noted that Paul McLatchy, the town administrator in Ashfield, had written that morning to ask about getting a group of towns together to hire a conservation agent. She noted that she had forwarded the email to Lloyd Crawford. Will said that Lloyd had told him he would be very interested in such an arrangement as the Conservation Commission's work was becoming more and more complicated. The board noted that details would have to be worked out to control costs but instructed Tinky to write back to Paul saying that they would be interested in discussing the matter.

Gary observed that mud season was approaching with the warm weather. He said he would have to close portions of selected roads like Ashfield Road to through traffic to keep the mud at bay. The board authorized him to do this.

Hussain showed off an emergency-services pager recently provided by Dan Nietsche of FRCOG. Hussain said that he and other emergency personnel would be evaluating it in various locations in the coming days.

Chris Tirone reported that Christine Hicks was due home the following day after her back surgery. He said she was no longer in pain. The Selectmen welcomed the news.

There being no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:56 p.m.

Respectfully submitted, Tinky Weisblat, Gal Friday

Williams Cosby

Hussain Hamdan

Robert MacLean