

**Town of Hawley, Massachusetts**  
**Minutes of a**  
**Selectboard / Board of Health / Zoning Board of Appeals Meeting**  
**and Tax Classification Hearing**  
**with the Communications Committee**  
**In Person & via Zoom**  
**December 5, 2023**

Present: Will Cosby, Hussain Hamdan, Robert MacLean – Selectboard  
Wayne Lemoine and Peter Beck – Communications Committee  
(Hussain and Tinky were also committee members)  
Tinky Weisblat, Gal Friday  
Virginia Gabert, Treasurer and Financial Administrator  
Gary Mitchell, Chris Tirone, John Maher, Donna Lemoine, Georgette deFriesse,  
and (via Zoom) Brian Foucher

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

1. **A tax-classification hearing began the evening.** Virginia explained that the Assessors had updated property values in town and that those values had been approved by the Department of Revenue. She added that the Assessors recommended setting a single tax rate and thought that it would be about \$16.80 per \$1000. In addition, they had calculated that the value of the average single-family home in town had gone up to \$259,000, and they expected the average increase in the tax bill for a single-family home would be about \$255, about what would be expected since the town had just voted to raise and appropriate part of the cost of a new truck for the highway department. She noted that the Assessors didn't think it made sense to have two tax rates since Hawley had no downtown businesses. Setting a commercial tax rate would just put a burden on farmers, whose land would be counted as commercial property – and in any case the town had always used a single rate in the past. Hussain moved to set a single tax rate, Bob seconded, and all voted in favor. Virginia told the Selectmen they would need to log into a system known as Gateway to sign off. There was some confusion as to whether login information had been provided in the past, however. Virginia she said she would follow up later.
2. **The group turned to the question of broadband.** Will observed that MBI had responded to a couple of the town's questions. The most important response, he said, was that the institute would not extend its December 11 deadline.

Will called on John Maher of Spectrum/ Charter, one of the two representatives of broadband companies present that evening. John said that his was a Fortune 70 company with millions of connections and customers. He noted that Spectrum had already wired parts of Savoy and Florida with money from the FCC's Rural Digital Opportunity Fund.

He said that his company was putting a lot of money into being a rural broadband provider. It offered internet, mobile, cable, and voice coverage and worked in most New England states.

Hussain asked about net neutrality. John said that at present Spectrum was not committed to net neutrality, although it would comply if the FCC ruled (as it had in the past before changing the rules) that net neutrality was necessary. Hussain asked how many maintenance trucks Spectrum had locally. John didn't precisely answer that question but said that trucks could be brought in from other states or other areas of Massachusetts.

Wayne and Will both mentioned the geographical split of Hawley and asked whether Charter planned to connect the entire town. John said that if Charter had to go through other towns to wire parts of Hawley, it would do so. Will observed that there was some "Middle Mile" wiring connecting municipal buildings locally and asked whether Charter planned to use any of that. John said it did not.

John turned again to Charter's experience, noting that it had connected 10 towns in the state that had had no previous service. Georgette said that she had read in newspaper articles that many subscribers were unhappy with Charter's service and asked whether he had a response. John said that people were always unhappy with prices but that in general he knew of no major problems. In response to another question from Georgette, he said that he didn't believe Charter had a lot of add-on fees or hidden fees.

Will asked what the price would be for one-gigabit service; John said \$125. Will noted that he appreciated Charter's low-income options. John said that the average speed for his company's customers was 300 to 400 megabits and that the company was working on symmetrical service – that is, getting equal speeds for upload and download.

Chris asked whether Charter had any discounts for veterans. John replied that he didn't think it did at present but said he would ask; he thought it was a good idea.

The board moved on to talk to Brian Foucher of WiValley. Brian reiterated that his company was in the process of being acquired by Ring Squared and its subsidiary, Access Plus. He noted that if Access Plus would take over the billing and maintenance tasks currently being performed by GoNetSpeed. He predicted that the change in ownership would take place either at the end of 2023 or early in 2024.

He said that WiValley was submitting applications for GAP funding for all the FHMS towns. He suggested that its application would stand out because the wireless network in place in town (which he said would be maintained) could be used for redundancy, but insisted that all of Hawley would be equipped with fiber capability. He said that fiber would hold a lot more data than the current system and would be a lot easier to use. He noted that with fiber, the smallest towns in the state could gain a competitive edge.

Will asked whether Brian had a list of prices, particularly for one-gigabit service. Brian said that prices were still being finalized and that all packages would be symmetrical. In response to a question from Wayne, Brian repeated that the service would be 100 percent fiber, with the wireless network being used to augment it. He said that WiValley planned to prioritize voice and public-safety coverage in emergencies. The redundant wireless pathways would not have as much capacity but would be able to handle those services plus email.

Will asked how Brian would serve such difficult-to-access areas as Dodge Corner Road. Brian said the company would work with Buckland and other towns as needed. He said they were working on some creative ideas, including perhaps using underground conduits on dirt roads.

Bob asked how WiValley would deal with the fact that in the FHMS network Charter had already been awarded federal funds (RDOF) to hook up some parts of the area and that GAP funds could not be used for the same purpose. Brian confirmed this; WiValley would still be eligible for GAP funding to connect houses not covered by the first program, however, and could hook up households that were covered at its own expense if it chose to. He indicated Wi Valley was still interested in taking on the task.

Brian noted that parts of East Hawley had been approved for RDOF funding. John said his company had never received those funds so those addresses were up for grabs.

The board thanked both guests. Hussain moved that the board issue a letter of support he had drafted earlier that was not vendor specific, which either company could include in its application. Bob seconded the motion, and all voted in favor. The board signed the letter, and Tinky was asked to send it to both parties.

- 3. The Selectboard turned to culvert and road work.** Will reported that it would not be possible to pave Sears Road until spring as asphalt plants were currently closing for the winter. Unfortunately, he noted, rain had delayed much of the work at Sears Road. However, three of the five pieces of the needed culvert were in place, and the other two were nearby and should be installed soon. He predicted that the road might be open by the following Monday, perhaps a few days later. He said that the surface would be dirt or compacted until spring. He said he wasn't sure of the schedule for the guardrails; drilling might be needed to install them if the ground froze. Perhaps the concrete barriers on the sides of the road would have to stay until spring. He said that the situation was complicated.

Gary noted that the road crew had been doing some work on the dugway, and Hussain thanked Gary for helping the fire department over the weekend when Engine 1 had had broken down at a training at the Town Garage. Will asked whether the fire department budget could cover repairs; it appeared so, according to Hussain and Virginia.

Peter Beck observed that his partner, Ken Bertsch, had been at a conference recently that had dealt with rural issues, and that culverts had been mentioned as a crucial piece of rural infrastructure.

Will said he had seen that fencing was being erected on East Road. Gary said that the road crew was working on that (and expressed his doubts about Brian's dirt-road conduit plan). Will suggested adding gravel to problem areas, for instance where East Road met Labelle. Gary noted that he had done some work in that area to mitigate the issue.

Will added there was no news on the King Corner project and that he hoped to hear soon about the contract for work on Ashfield Road.

4. **Hussain reported on the ambulance situation.** He described continuing uncertainty about the future of the Adams Ambulance Service. The good news was that the shareholders had voted to keep the service open as long as possible, and the service was looking for a new company to handle its billing. (It was currently bringing in only 22 percent of what it was billing, significantly less than the national average.) However, Sean Sanderson had resigned, costing the service not just its director but also a paramedic. For the moment, he explained, Adams and Cheshire were going to be served primarily by Northern Berkshire. The situation was complicated.

Meanwhile, the board signed a letter expressing interest in forming a local service with Charlemont and Rowe. Tinky noted that the Selectmen in those two towns had invited Hawley to a meeting on January 17. The board agreed that Hussain would represent Hawley at that meeting as he was apparently the only one available at that time. Hussain said that Susan Lewis, the director of the Office of Emergency Services, had expressed her willingness to help. OEMS was aware of the situation Hawley was facing and was ready to expedite the process if needed.

Will asked how the new service might work, especially if a new paramedic-level service were created. Hussain explained that paramedic services had higher training requirements and required a lot of expensive additional equipment, such as cardiac monitors (\$35,000 each). He noted that there were also many regulated drugs not found at the EMT level, along with accountability requirements. Will asked whether Hussain knew how this might affect Hawley's budget. Hussain said that wasn't clear yet; discussions were in the preliminary stage. He stressed that the towns would not be funding the ambulance by themselves. Patient insurance and billing were a part of the equation, and in general paramedic-level transports got billed for more, which could make up some of the difference. The group agreed to revisit the topic in mid-January. Virginia suggested that the three towns might be able to get a regionalization grant to help defray some of the costs, and Hussain observed that if Adams didn't survive, the new service might be able to obtain some of its equipment. Hussain moved to endorse a letter of interest to the Rowe and Charlemont boards, Bob seconded the motion, and all voted in favor. Tinky was asked to scan the letter and send it to her counterparts in Charlemont and Rowe as well as to Hussain, who would share it with Dennis Annear.

On the topic of ambulance service, Virginia remarked that the town had not yet received a bill from Adams Ambulance for the year. Hussain said that he couldn't vote on this topic since he worked with Adams.

He indicated, however, that Adams had been waiting for Hawley to send a check. After signing the contract, the service had not felt it necessary to send a bill separately. He suggested that Hawley pay half the assessment for the moment as half a year's service had already been rendered, even though the future was uncertain. The other Board members supported this approach. Will asked Virginia to put that half payment on the next warrant.

5. Tinky asked about hot-water-heater bids. No progress had been made so this was deferred. A little later, Georgette offered to pay \$150 toward a hot-water heater (she had found one on the internet priced at \$270) and was thanked.

**In other business, Virginia stated that she had a request from Donna about the Town-Clerk budget.** Donna had recently attended an educational seminar, but the Town Clerk expense account was almost exhausted. Virginia suggested that Hawley's continuing-education budget, which had \$2,224, be used to pay for this. Hussain moved that this happen, Bob seconded the motion, and all voted in favor. Virginia and Donna noted that Donna hoped to go to an additional conference in January. After some discussion about costs (and whether it made sense for the Town to pay for accommodations for this two-and-a-half-day conference), the group decided to have Donna come up with a full list of expenses for January so the board could review and vote on a specific amount.

Tinky asked about Whip City's possible inclusion in the MBI grant process. Will stated that he was still waiting to hear from Whip City and said that if he got good information from that company, he hoped to work with Tinky on a proposal for Hawley's work with it the following Monday. Hussain expressed reservations. He said he wondered whether, if the grant were awarded to Hawley with Whip City, the Town would be stuck. Will countered that working with Whip City would give Hawley an additional revenue stream in the future. Hussain argued that quite a bit of due diligence would be needed; Charter's and WiValley's applications didn't involve any financial responsibility for the Town.

There being no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:39 p.m.

Respectfully submitted, Tinky Weisblat, Gal Friday

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Williams Cosby

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Hussain Hamdan

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Robert MacLean