

Town of Hawley, Massachusetts
Minutes of a
Selectboard / Board of Health / Zoning Board of Appeals Meeting
in person & via Zoom
March 12, 2024

Present: Will Cosby, Hussain Hamdan, Robert MacLean – Selectboard
Tinky Weisblat, Gal Friday; Virginia Gabert, Treasurer and Financial Administrator
Jake Eberwein, Frank Cote, Gary Mitchell, Chris Tirone, Lloyd Crawford, Suzanne
Crawford, Peter Beck, Ken Bertsch, Kim Fitzroy, and via Zoom Brittany Wolcott

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

1. **The group spoke with Jake Eberwein, and Frank Cote of Berk12**, who were working on the Mohawk/Hawlemont School Sustainability Study. Jake provided background on the history of Berk12, which focused on K-12 education. He said it had worked on issues in Berkshire County that were akin to the dilemmas faced by Western Franklin County schools: declining population, resources, and enrollment.

He explained that those at the Sustainability Study were hoping to explore possibilities and options for local towns and schools. He said they wanted to engage as many people as possible early on. The challenges ahead of the districts were shrinking enrollment, increases in the costs of running schools, and the growing needs of students.

He outlined three upcoming stages for the study. The first one, which should last until the end of the school year, entailed collecting data and analyzing the situation, including enrollment, finances, and buildings, as well as looking at/building on past studies. The second phase, which would take place over the summer, was “creating a list of possibilities” – coming up with ideas, large and small – and looking at how those ideas might maintain and/or enhance educational experience, as well as the financial impact they might have on the districts and towns. The group hoped to narrow these down to a smaller number and examine their potential five-year impact on the districts and towns. The third phase would take place in the fall. In it, the group would return to the towns and the public with its findings and present recommendations and options.

Jake mentioned that a steering committee had been formed with representatives from most towns, including Hawley. He noted that the group hoped to set up advisory teams or subcommittees and referred the board to the study’s website for more details.

He explained that early questions could be found in the survey he planned to mail to the Town Office the following day; he said he hoped people would take the time to fill out the survey.

Frank was introduced as the group's vocational specialist. Hussain brought up a situation in the 1990s when state money had been used to build numerous new schools that turned out to be unnecessary with subsequent declining enrollments. This led to difficult decisions, such as Heath's closing of its elementary school. He implied that consolidation and regionalization, if they were to save money, would mean cutting back on staffing and costs, not just changing names. He also referred to the idea of finding multiple purposes for school buildings, as well as sharing services between the schools and towns, such as IT.

Hussain also spoke briefly about the vocational-school situation, noting that Mohawk had once been strong on vocational learning. About the time he was in high school locally, however, emphasis had switched largely to four-year college prep with very little attention to the trades, a mistake in his opinion. Frank said that this point was very important.

Jake spoke to the problem of needing more revenue, saying that advocacy was part of his group's work but also noting that the state could not be counted on to solve all problems. He suggested that one possible solution to funding the schools might be to combine classes. He also reminded the board that things could remain as they were but were bound to become more expensive.

Will asked for questions. Suzanne asked about the process for getting people involved in the advisory group. Jake said that the next steering committee meeting was on March 21 and could be viewed via zoom. He again referred to contact information on the website.

Tinky brought up the thorny issue of community, observing that for many people schools were the last vestige of community as downtowns deteriorated and people worked more and more from home or commuted. Jake said the group welcomed thoughts on the community/identity question, noting that forming new identities for schools and communities had to be part of the plan.

Frank noted that there just weren't enough vocational slots in the state for the students who wanted them but added that there was grant money available for repurposing buildings. Perhaps vocational or adult education could be incorporated into the schools.

The board thanked Jake and Frank for the informative presentation.

- 2. Discussion turned to the Town Office mini-splits, which were not working.** Will said that he was sad to report that the unit by the front door had a coil leak. He had asked for a repair estimate; it came to \$1900. Replacing it (and getting a five-year warrantee on the replacement) would cost \$2100 so he recommended the replacement. The old unit was more than a year out of its warrantee. Lloyd asked whether it would be possible to bargain about the cost/warrantee, noting that the town's maintenance budget had \$5000 and adding that new technologies appeared very expensive. Will noted that the mini-splits didn't just heat and cool; they kept the building from getting too humid and therefore helped the town fulfill its mandate to preserve records.

Hussain observed that the mini-splits also kept the electronics in the Town Office from getting too moist. Will asked for a motion to replace or repair the defective unit. Lloyd objected that the other unit might also fail soon. Hussain suggested that such a motion was premature and that the company be called to see if it would honor the lapsed warrantee. Will leaned more toward replacement; even if the manufacturer did come through (which it might not), the repaired unit might break again. Will said he had a lot on his plate at present. Hussain offered to call the companies himself to see whether he could negotiate any reduction in cost, to give Will a break. Will thanked him.

3. **Regarding the new hot-water heater**, Hussain reported that Virginia had found the town's Home-Depot account so he would be able to get the heater soon.

While the group was discussing repairs and renovations, Hussain mentioned that the windows at the Fire House had been slated to be insulated and framed several years earlier. Virginia explained that the Fire Department had its own account and should go ahead and arrange for the work to be done. Will asked who had done the windows at the Town Office, noting that Green Communities didn't fund that sort of work. Lloyd said it was possible that although it had not funded window work in the past, the Green Communities initiative now might. He promised to investigate the matter. Lloyd noted that one problem with repairing the Fire Station windows had been that the town didn't know what it might do in terms of expansion. Hussain said that any new construction would probably keep the existing structure so insulating the windows would therefore be beneficial either way.

4. **The group moved ahead to new business briefly, welcoming Kim Fitzroy**, who explained that she hoped to erect a shed on her property that would be too close to the road to conform to the zoning rules; it would also be fairly near the river behind the house. She said she hoped it would be perhaps 15 feet from the road. Will asked whether the building would be on a pad. She said she would ask the building inspector. She explained that the building was more than 200 square feet in area. Virginia said that she believed that Kim needed to apply for a building permit before she could apply for a variance. Kim said she would do so. Lloyd noted that there would also be a Conservation Commission permitting dimension, due to proximity to the river, although he doubted that it would be a major hurdle. Hussain said that issuing a permit was likely; Kim just faced some hoops to jump through.
5. **Will and Hussain reported briefly on their meeting with the Selectmen in Plainfield**, where they had asked about a possible partnership in terms of broadband. Will noted that Plainfield already operated fiber in Hawley, at the old AmeriCorps complex. The complex was about to change hands, but Plainfield planned to continue to serve it. Will said that Plainfield had been receptive to the idea of a partnership. He added that he and Hussain had explained that Hawley was still waiting to learn the fate of Charter Communications' application for MBI funding so the partnership idea was a backup. Tinky asked whether WiValley still planned to apply to wire Hawley in Round II of the MBI offerings. Will said that unfortunately there might not be a round two. It now appeared to be on hold. Hussain expressed concern that future rounds of Federal funding, expected earlier, might not be guaranteed.

6. **Will asked about the Highway Department's planned work.** Gary said there was "lots of it." He reported that Brandon Reynolds had received his hoister's license earlier in the day. Gary also noted that the problems on Route 8A near the Pudding Hollow corner were getting worse and needed repair. He said he was getting an estimate for the work. Virginia said she hoped that the Winter Road Assistance Program might help fund it. Suzanne asked whether perhaps a sign could be put up to warn motorists of the damage. Meanwhile, Will thanked the road crew for doing a lovely job removing the trees behind the Town Office. The group spoke briefly about the spots on Ashfield Road that were closed.
7. **Tinky passed out a draft of the Selectboard contribution to the Town Report.** Hussain said he liked it in general but might want to add a little something about broadband. Tinky promised to mail him the file so he could insert his ideas. Virginia asked for the absolute deadline for the Town Report. Tinky suggested mid-April.
8. **The group discussed options for web hosting.** Tinky and Virginia explained that the town could pay the hosting company \$347 or so a year for hosting and hire Bill Tuman for extra work if there were a problem or hire Bill to do the hosting for \$450. The group agreed that having Bill host seemed like a better option, but the board wanted more detail. Hussain pointed out that the Town was actually paying for two hosting services as it still used Dreamhost for email. He asked if this cost was built in. It wasn't. Virginia said she needed to know what Dreamhost was currently costing the town. Tinky promised to investigate. The group wanted a figure that should cover everything, including a few hours of troubleshooting by Bill Tuman.

In other business, the group discussed extending the contract for the King Corner work, which was supposed to be concluded by the end of the year but was progressing very slowly. Lloyd offered to talk to Holden Sparacino about this. Will moved that the extension be requested, Bob seconded the motion, and all voted in favor.

The group briefly discussed the new contract about the old tri-town landfill. Documents for a change order had been received, too recently to post for this meeting. Upon inspecting the documents, Hussain noted the reoccurrence of some issues that had come up in the past. He promised to reach out to CEC (the vendor) and follow up. The others agreed to have this happen.

Tinky brought up John Sears's email to legislators about having the state make deals with large companies for renewable energy that would overrule local regulation. Hussain said he agreed with John in principal but saw no actual language for legislation. He said he would need to see it before making any decisions. Tinky agreed to ask John.

Tinky presented a request from Randy Crotchier at the FRCOG about having the town adopt board-of-health regulations about septic systems and tobacco. The group decided to put off discussing it for at least two weeks, and probably four.

Virginia announced that the Finance Committee was meeting the following morning to review the FY25 budget. She asked that the group let her know about anything that should be added soon.

Hussain said that the AFG grant deadline had been missed for the year, mostly because Cummington had had some issues. The towns would revisit this next year, he explained. The group briefly discussed replacing the tax collector's computer. Hussain said he had verified that the issue was not the ethernet cable by testing another computer on it, but he was not sure what was wrong with the collector's computer. The computer seemed to be trying to run the Wi-Fi at the same time. Virginia said there was \$1000 in the budget for computer equipment. Hussain said he would like to meet with the tax collector before deciding for sure that she needed a new computer. Tinky said that Betty would be in the office at 2 p.m. the following Tuesday and promised to confirm that information.

Returning to the overall budget, the group decided to put it on the agenda for the next regular meeting.

Tinky mentioned that the pole hearing notices had elicited a response from a property owner who was planning to put in a driveway where a pole was slated to be located. She was told to ask him whether he had applied for a permit for the driveway; otherwise, he wouldn't have much of a leg to stand on.

At 8:47 p.m. Hussain moved that the meeting go to executive session for the purpose of discussing personnel measures related to the Highway Department. Bob seconded the motion. All voted yes individually by voice vote.

Respectfully submitted, Tinky Weisblat, Gal Friday

Williams Cosby

Hussain Hamdan

Robert MacLean