

**Minutes of a  
Selectboard / Board of Health / Zoning Board of Appeals Meeting  
in person & via Zoom  
September 10, 2024**

Present: Will Cosby, Hussain Hamdan, Robert MacLean – Selectboard  
Tinky Weisblat, Gal Friday; Virginia Gabert, Treasurer and Financial Administrator  
Gary Mitchell, Chris Tirone, Donna Lemoine, Wayne Lemoine, and Lloyd Crawford

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

1. **The Town Clerk, Donna Lemoine, asked for \$288.18 to attend a clerks' conference.** The funding would cover registration and accommodation for two nights. Asked how many conferences she would like to attend per year, she said there were three. Will urged her to work with the Finance Committee to put this sort of expense on her budget for future years since there was nothing in the budget for it during the current fiscal year. Hussain said that he couldn't recall that the town had ever before attended conferences with this frequency.

Donna explained that the conference would provide her with necessary information about two new systems the state was introducing for town clerks to use, one for elections and the other for vital statistics. She said that she believed that Pam, the former clerk, had gone to such conferences.

Will noted that these expenses had never been budgeted at this level. Hussain said that he couldn't say what Pam had done in terms of attending meetings, but Pam hadn't asked for funds for the meetings. Virginia added that in the past the town clerk had frequently gone to local meetings but the town hadn't paid for her trips. Hussain reiterated that the question needed to be hashed out with the Finance Committee. He said that perhaps this conference was justifiable as a one-time necessity but added that the state imposed new mandates all the time. In his field, he said, alternatives to going to far-away conferences (online trainings, email groups, working with other communities) could be found or arranged.

Virginia said that the continuing-education budget, which had covered Donna's last conference, had \$2774, adding that it had to take care of all town officials who might work on the budget for want to go to conferences. Will commented that part of being one of the smallest towns in the State meant that Hawley wasn't able to budget for a lot of this.

Wayne asked whether Donna could pay for the conference on her own and be reimbursed in the next fiscal year. Hussain noted there was no guarantee she would get reimbursed. Donna stated that she hadn't known she was even supposed to be submitting budget requests when she came into office.

Hussain discussed situations in which other town officials had to go to trainings. He noted a case in which Bob Root had gone to a training near Worcester only to be told that he shouldn't be there, Hussain said that he often went to conferences but the town seldom paid more than mileage if that. He noted that the far-away location of most meetings was a problem for small towns in western Massachusetts.

Tinky asked whether the town had any other plans for the continuing-education budget during the current fiscal year. Will said that it was early in the year so it was hard to say. He asked Donna to choose between the September meeting she was discussing and the upcoming one in February. She said that would be hard since she didn't know what was planned for February. Hussain opined that the September one, preceding the national elections, might be more important. Will suggested she keep our eyes open for an email about predicting financial needs for the coming fiscal year. Donna explained that she had not been told about budgeting when she had been hired, not even budgeting for elections.

Virginia observed that the last time Donna had asked for funds for a conference, it had been after the budget for the current fiscal year had been set. Wayne and Donna mentioned that the state seemed to require more and more training and in general to ask more and more of town clerks.

Virginia said that ideally the budget query would be sent out in December but noted that it might be later this time around. Hussain recalled that all department heads had been communicated to by Virginia about putting together their budget wish lists.

Hussain noted that FRCOG, large municipal law firms, and the Secretary of the Commonwealth's Office had all done trainings locally. He suggested that the Town should get together with neighboring communities and request such trainings.

Donna observed that some training was available online, but it usually took place on Thursday during her office hours so she couldn't always concentrate on it. Will and Hussain both suggested that she could have office hours on another day, or that she could choose to be unavailable to the public during these times. Tinky suggested that since Donna wasn't paid for extra hours, she might shorten her office hours to give herself time to do the online training.

Tinky asked whether Donna could pay for her conference and then be reimbursed if there were leftover continuing-education funds at the end of the year. Virginia countered that leftover funds were expected to roll over into the next fiscal year; at the moment the town only added \$500 to that budget category per year. Hussain said that sooner or later someone else would want training.

Donna said that she hadn't been planning to bill the town for the entire cost of her trip, just the cost of registration and overnight accommodations. She said she would absorb the costs herself. The board thanked her for being willing to do so.

2. Discussion moved to the spotty internet around town. Will observed that his internet had been doing badly over the past month. Hussain said that he had talked to Lark Thwing, to Melanie in Savoy, to the Four-Town Broadband Group, and to GoNetSpeed, and had also heard many resident complaints. He cited frequent outages, including those at the fire station. The Internet went out, came back on for perhaps 60 seconds, and then went out again. In addition to outright outages, there had been times when there was Internet connectivity, but certain websites didn't load. This was confirmed by the fact the websites in question can be reached via a VPN; a switching system appeared to be broken. Lloyd said he was having trouble with Verizon as well as GoNetSpeed, especially when dealing with any Google product. Hussain noted this also has affected Wi-Fi calling service. According to GoNetSpeed, Hussain said, the problem was MBI's "middle mile." He added that there seemed to be internet problems throughout western Massachusetts. He voiced his own frustration at the failures with his Wi-Fi, which meant he was going to have a big long-distance bill on his landline; he was accustomed to connecting through the Wi-Fi to his cell phone, which had unlimited calling.

Will said that apparently GoNetSpeed had taken over Hawley's contract from WiValley, which was no longer serving the town at all, but had not received any of the necessary equipment. It didn't have its own lift to reach the high towers involved. There was concern that the new fiber optic network, still several years down the road, would not be installed in time to deal with these issues.

Will suggested writing a letter discussing the decline in service and need for help. MBI and the FCC both had oversight over the Four Town network. Hussain offered to prepare a draft. Will asked for authority to sign it. Virginia noted the Assessors' software was on the cloud, and Hussain noted the Fire Station was without internet.

The group also discussed reactivating the fiber connection in the town office or getting Starlink for the building. Wayne indicated that that service was currently offering a sale with a \$300 up-front cost instead of the usual \$600.

Hussain noted that Starlink would be great from an emergency-management standpoint because communication would be resilient if the lines went down. Donna felt Starlink for everyone might be cheaper than fiber, but others, including Hussain, weren't sure.

The group returned to the subject of the letter to MBI and the FCC. Hussain noted the FCC was particularly relevant to the phone outages. Will made a motion to send the letter, to have MBI made aware of the severity of Hawley's internet related problems related to GONETSPEED, to authorize him to sign. Hussain seconded. All voted in favor.

Returning to Starlink, Will asked Virginia what the Town could afford and whether \$600 to 700 could be had out of the IT budget. Virginia noted that was probably the case. There was always the reserve fund as well. She went into her computer to try to get more information.

Hussain noted that the town might also consider purchasing a cell-signal booster, which would be a one-time cost and would amplify cellular phone service. Perhaps the town could find a grant for one, he suggested. The booster, though it could serve to allow a cell phone to act as a mobile hotspot, would not provide service to all the computers at Town Hall. However, Hussain feels it was beneficial for its own merits, especially from an emergency services standpoint.

After checking her records, Virginia reported there was more than \$4000 in the internet-access, installation, and equipment account; most wasn't encumbered. Lloyd suggested that perhaps that cost would prompt a special town meeting as several issues were coming up. Will asked Tinky to put a possible purchase of Starlink on the agenda for the next meeting.

3. **The group discussed Ashfield Road.** Tinky said that she had been asked by several people about the schedule for construction there. Will said that unfortunately the work was dependent on the weather. He hoped the project would mostly be done by the end of September, but he could make no promises.

Hussain shared a concern of Mark Mizula regarding fine stone-dust particles that were flying around the construction area, particularly when cars went by. Mark was concerned about health hazards the particles might pose. Hussain explained that he and Chris Tirone had watered down the road, adding that the fire department could not take this role on as a regular activity. He suggested that the contractor could either water the road regularly or place calcium particles on the road to block the dust. Will countered that those actions weren't in the budget, adding that since construction was proceeding so quickly they would be obsolete almost immediately. Hussain stated that in this case he agreed with Mark that the dust could pose a health threat. He noted that the project had come in under budget and said that he felt the dust control should be prioritized for leftover funds over rebuilding additional parts of the road. Will disagreed with this premise. Lloyd suggested that when the contract was expanded (which would probably happen soon) a clause about the dust might be inserted.

Virginia asked how much it would cost to put the calcium on the road. Gary said it would possibly cost several thousand dollars but wouldn't last. Hussain said that the problem posed by the dust was, like asbestos exposure, more dangerous over time than in a single event. Virginia asked whether the town could give the Mizulas and their neighbors N95 masks to help them breathe safely. Hussain said that there were plenty of masks at the fire station and offered to make sure that the residents of Ashfield Road received them. He asked when the gravel would go on the road. Gary noted that it could be as soon as the following week. Hussain suggested that it would be best to consider this experience when drafting future contracts.

**In other business, Lloyd said that he and the Conservation Commission were still hoping to settle the situation at King Corner. He also asked about the driveway situations with Berkshire East and Magnus Thorsson and Courtney Bourns.** Tinky was asked to put all these matters on the agenda for the next meeting and to invite Dean Desmarais, Maria Desmarais, and Nate Russell of GZA to the next Selectboard meeting.

**Lloyd also reported on the situation with the bank stabilization behind the highway garage.** He said that the DEP had agreed to allocate the funds for this project with a few tweaks. Lloyd said he was asking for reassurance in writing that the town would be reimbursed for expenses on this project. He asked Virginia whether she could take funds out of the maintenance budget and then reimburse that budget. She said that this was not needed. The funds from the DEP were like a grant so she was able to spend the money in advance of being reimbursed. She noted that she would need to know to whom she should send bills, however, Lloyd promised to investigate.

**Virginia observed that she had received several memorial contributions lately for the Fire Department.** She asked who would acknowledge the contribution. Hussain said that he had conferred with Brandon Root and would be happy to send letters to the donors if Virginia gave him their names and addresses. There was a brief discussion about whether the donations were tax deductible. The consensus was that this was not an issue for Hawley to weigh in on; Hussain said that when he had written thank-you letters in the past, he had never mentioned tax consequences. He said amounts would not be referenced in the letters. Donors could use their cancelled checks as evidence of their contributions.

**Tinky reported that school superintendent Sheryl Stanton had asked whether the board was able to meet with her and with officials from Charlemont** at Hawlemont School on the evening of October 7 to discuss the status of the school sustainability study. The board members agreed to meet that evening at 7 p.m. and asked Tinky to send them the information Sheryl had included in her email.

**Tinky asked whether the board would write a letter of support for the concept of the Northern Tier Railway** as requested by State Representative Natalie Blais. Will and Hussain both had concerns about the idea. Will pointed out that two freight lines had priority on the tracks involved, making it hard for passenger trains to gain traction. Hussain had trouble with the additional amount of double track that would be needed, as well as with problems posed by the Hoosac Tunnel. He said he liked the idea of the rail line (from the back of the room Chris endorsed the idea heartily) but felt the proponents were underestimating the costs.

**Tinky reminded the group that an engineer from Shelburne had offered to pursue grants on behalf of the town** in exchange for getting the contracts to work on the culverts for which the grants would pay. The board members said that they were happy with their current grant and engineering arrangements.

**Hussain invited everyone to the Fire Department anniversary party** the following Sunday, noting the Berkshire Pizzeria was donating pizza to the event.

There being no other business, the meeting adjourned at 8:49 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