

Town of Hawley, Massachusetts
Minutes of a
Selectboard / Board of Health / Zoning Board of Appeals Meeting
with the Finance Committee and the Personnel Committee
July 14, 2026

Present: Will Cosby, Hussain Hamdan, and Robert MacLean – Selectboard
Lloyd Crawford and Ken Bertsch plus Hussain Hamdan – Finance Committee
John Sears and (via Zoom) Robert Sears plus Will Cosby – Personnel Committee
Tinky Weisblat, Gal Friday; Virginia Gabert, Treasurer and Financial Administrator
Gary Mitchell and Chris Tirone – Highway Department
Jennifer Jason, Trina Sternstein, Leslie Cooper, and (via Zoom) Michael Miller

The meeting was called to order at 7:01 p.m. The board signed warrants and approved minutes from a previous meeting. Then:

1. **The group talked to Jennifer Jason**, a relatively new community member who had volunteered to serve on the School Sustainability Study group and had expressed interest in a school-committee position when one became available. She explained that she was Niles Lavalley's fiancée and shared a small child with Niles. She added that she was opening a small kids' play space in Shelburne Falls within the next few weeks. Lloyd expressed enthusiasm about a volunteer who didn't yet have grey hair, and Will spoke for all when he said that the school system was important to the town. The group thanked Jennifer for coming in and invited her to stay on if she wished to; she did.
2. **Trina Sternstein and Leslie Cooper registered their objections to the new road signs and the one on Pudding Hollow Road in particular.** Trina said she believed that sign was ugly and in the wrong place. She noted that there were also signs at the end of Pudding Hollow Road and at Forge Hill Road. She said she understood that truckers could be misled by GPS devices, but she thought the signs were misleading. She hoped the sign at the bottom of the road could be closer to the bridge.

Will explained that he didn't have a good alternative and that signs came in distinct shapes that were familiar to drivers; the shape for the signs in question said "Stop." Hussain observed that the problem was not with local drivers. He gave examples of out-of-town (mostly out-of-state) drivers who had gotten into dangerous situations in Hawley by following their GPS. Trina reminded him that local people should have a say, too. John showed a photo of the "Your GPS is wrong" signs that had been erected in various parts of town. Trina suggested that such a sign might be preferable. Will gave another example of a truck driver who had gotten stuck trying to get into the State Forest. Leslie told the group that someone she had invited to her house had seen the sign and turned around. Leslie opined that a "road closed" sign might attract young people looking for trouble and suggested a sign that said "Local Traffic Only." Hussain noted that that might work, and Will counseled Leslie to warn her guests and have them bring a map. He said the board would consider the objections, although he could not guarantee that a change would be made.

Trina pointed out that the signs on Will's family's property were tasteful. Hussain reminded the group that the road boss had been asked to solve a serious problem and had done so within his discretion and his budget. Safety should be paramount, Hussain argued. The board indicated that no decision would be made that evening. Leslie said she just wanted the board to show respect for the opinions of the people living in town. Will repeated that the town was looking for a viable solution that would stop the trucks. Trina suggested a couple of alternate places to put the sign. Chris argued that many signs (like the "your GPS is wrong" ones) assumed that people could read in English; he argued that many truck drivers did not speak or read the language. Jennifer said she didn't find the signs off putting. Will said the board had to move on in its agenda but said changes to signage and placement would be considered

3. **Discussion continued about possible changes to personnel.** Will noted that the main objective was to allow the Town Clerk to assume some of the responsibilities of the assistant to the Selectboard. He thought the idea was important to consider. It would give the position benefits, which were important in retaining the current town clerk, and it would also allow her to assist the treasurer without creating a new job. He therefore suggested an article on the upcoming Special Town Meeting warrant asking voters to raise and appropriate funding for the benefits. He cited recent newspaper articles about the difficulties of keeping town clerks. Tinky added that she thought it was important to give the Town Clerk a higher hourly wage than the assistant job currently received.

Hussain said he was satisfied with all the town's office employees. He noted, however, that all of the three were part time. He reminded the group that the voters had just approved a budget and that the need for a benefitted position had not been brought up during the budget process. He said he knew that the role of financial administrator had expanded; he was concerned about taxes going up. From a fiduciary point of view, he said, the town was hard pressed to create this position. He wondered aloud about the relative costs of potential turnover versus benefits for the Town Clerk.

Robert asked how many hours the Town Clerk current worked per week. He was told eight. Will suggested that most of the new hours for that position would come from the assistant's portfolio; others, from the financial administrator's budget. Robert observed that as the financial administrator's job responsibilities increased, it would be helpful to have someone on the spot who had already started working with the administrator so new help would not be needed. Will added that the Town Clerk had had municipal training and was interested in learning more about the financial side of things. Robert noted that the cost of adding to the financial administrator's burden might help justify the funding to voters.

Virginia suggested that if people were not comfortable with combining positions, one person could technically take on more than one role. For example, the Town Clerk could do her job and that of the assistant Town Clerk. Hussain said that the redundancy in the past had been useful and that he was not in favor of eliminating an assistant town clerk, citing how Tinky had needed to step in at prior times.

John brought up another consideration. It was hard to find qualified people to work in Hawley, he observed. In the past few applications had come in, and when the town had hired people, it had sometimes had to let them go. He noted that qualified people were a gift.

Will argued that the town was showing its values by trying to expand the Town Clerk position, but Hussain countered that the group was discussing a person rather than a position. Will argued that it was important to have some redundancy/backup for the financial administrator.

Jennifer shared her experience as the former employer of a staff of seven. She said she had focused on the person as well as the role and had tried to show that she valued her staff by paying them more than they would have received elsewhere.

Lloyd said he was wearing two hats that evening. As a taxpayer, he would probably be on board with expanding the Town Clerk's role. As chair of the Finance committee, he was concerned that the cost of running the town was rising more quickly than the town's resources. He said he hoped for a resolution at the Special Town Meeting, noting that the town must be transparent and open in bringing the matter to the voters.

Hussain asked whether the town would follow the personnel policy and advertise the position and suggested the hiring of this person had basically already been decided. There was some discussion about whether it was a new position at all, which would make a difference to the need to advertise.

Virginia talked a bit about the origins of the idea of expanding the position, recalling that when Tinky had said she might need to take medical leave she had wondered who could cover for Tinky. When she found out that the Town Clerk had left her other job, she had come up with the idea of combining hours. She added that adding benefits was not always up to voters. If she adopted a baby, she noted, the town would be required by law to pay for the baby's health insurance.

Hussain said he understood that not everything could be controlled. However, even with benefits the town might lose an employee. He noted that the individual had left her past job, which had had benefits, voluntarily. He was concerned that the budget was not getting smaller. Tinky countered that the responsibilities of just about everyone in the office had increased. Robert said he saw the question as one of expanding a position, not creating a new one, and therefore didn't see the need for advertising. He opined that the town was indeed trying to save a person but also was trying to expand a role, adding unseen benefits to that person's service to the town. He asked whether the Town Clerk was interested in taking on additional responsibilities; Will said that she was. Robert observed that with new regulations, more financial training for someone would be needed in the future.

Hussain reiterated his concern that these issues had not come up during the normal budget process. He also said that he had not seen a resume from the Town Clerk.

Virginia said that the board could ask the clerk for whatever it wanted. She added that the issue had been under discussion for a month with no resolution. Hussain said he couldn't recommend the expansion to the voters at present. Lloyd said the matter could be brought to the voters without a formal recommendation, although Hussain worried that by calling the meeting the Selectboard appeared to be endorsing the idea.

Will again emphasized the need for redundancy, and Virginia said that the voters could be presented with expanding hours. She added that there was no redundancy in her job; if she were to have an emergency or retire, the town would be forced to hire and train two people to replace her.

Lloyd asked what Bob thought. Bob said he believed that the question should be put to the voters at a town meeting.

The group discussed language for the warrant. Hussain and Will disagreed again about what might happen (and what the town should do) if the Town Clerk decided to quit.

Hussain asked what the expense of adding benefits for a position would do to the tax rate. Virginia explained that this wouldn't be known until the tax rate was finalized. Hussain recalled that an earlier email from Virginia had suggested that under the present budget, the average tax bill would probably go up about \$500 per year; this proposal would add perhaps \$45 more. Virginia noted that higher-end homes would see their taxes go up more than less expensive homes. She noted that people would already be upset that their taxes were going up; the additional sum for benefits wouldn't add too much to that concern.

Hussain and Will agreed that health insurance was expensive. Virginia observed that the town could reduce the share of insurance it paid relative to the employee; Hussain said he was loath to do this. It would require a lot of notice (if it were ever to be done), and people might be grandfathered in.

Robert said that in his old job a number of employees had been eligible for Mass Health. Hussain said this only worked if people's income was low. Robert asked why the town didn't get any form of subsidy, and Hussain explained that the town purchased insurance at market rate. He described the workings of the Massachusetts Health Connector plan.

Lloyd suggested focusing on the next steps needed. Hussain drafted warrant language for the benefits question, to which the group agreed. The group set the Special Town Meeting date for Monday, August 17, at 7 p.m. The warrant will be finalized at the next Selectboard meeting.

The Finance and Personnel Committees adjourned at 8:33 p.m.

4. **In grant and road news,** Will said he was still waiting for the King Corner contract and hoped to hear soon from VHB about the Dugway. Gary said that the town was listed to receive \$109,000 on Grant Central.

He was working on uses for the funds that could be applied for. Will said that cutting/edging was important. Gary said he wanted to spend the money as much as possible. He and Virginia pledged to work together on figuring this out.

5. **The next issue was cemetery mowing.** John stated that the Historical Commission had met the previous day and had voted to pay half the cost of a new mower out of its budget. Chris noted that mowing wouldn't be sufficient; a trimmer would be needed, and the mower would need to have a rear discharge to avoid spraying the tombstones. (In answer to a later question from Will, Gary said that the mower the Highway Department was looking at had that capability.) Chris also expressed concern about stones. John concurred that more than mere mowing was involved. He added that the Sons and Daughters of Hawley were thinking of replacing the veterans' memorial sign outside the Hawley Meeting House, which had deteriorated sadly. He suggested that since the building belonged to the Sons and Daughters they should be the ones to replace it; some kind of fundraising would probably be needed. Tinky told him she had heard from Camille White that someone was missing from the current sign and offered to get in touch with Camille for details. Further discussion about the mower ensued. Bob said he was concerned that a zero-turn mower would need to be a certain size. Gary said the mower in question seemed to fit the bill.
6. **More appointments were made for FY27.** Jason Velazquez had agreed to serve on the Communications Committee so he was appointed. The Council on Aging had met with Paul Morin and had requested that he be appointed to the council so that was done as well.

In other business, Virginia brought up a renewal notice she had received from the Small-Town Administrators of Massachusetts. On her recommendation, the group decided to wait to renew until the personnel issues were resolved

Tinky said she was still trying to get more information about a possible earmark from Senator Paul Mark's office for past overpayment of the school budget. She was told to talk to Wilder Sparks in Charlemont or perhaps John Gould on the senator's staff.

Hussain asked about the status of the School Sustainability Study. He was told that two people who had recently left the meeting, Ken Bertsch and Jennifer Jason, might have been able to fill him in. Will said that when he had most recently heard about the study, its members had hoped to have something to present in October. Hussain said he would like this issue placed on the next agenda. Will volunteered that there was now a possibility of funding a Chapter 70 commission. The group discussed the dire straits of the school districts. Hussain asked about the PILOT program. Will said he had been disappointed not to be appointed to the PILOT commission but was still planning to attend an upcoming meeting about it. Hussain said he might attend another meeting. All agreed that more PILOT funding could provide crucial help for Hawley. The group spoke about drafting a letter to the commission; Tinky suggested this be done after the meetings, when more information would be available.

Chris returned briefly to the issue of cemetery mowing, noting that weed whacking could take four hours for a single cemetery.

Tinky expressed her appreciation to Hussain and the Fire Department for organizing the July 4 party, which had been very well attended and received, although several of the firefighters sadly had to depart to a mutual aid call in Orange during the event, Hussain noted that they had been appreciated there and the fire had been suppressed.

Bob asked what was happening on the internet front. Will said he was hoping to call the construction manager from Charter soon. Hussain said that someone working on a Charter crew had not known who Hawley's electrical inspector was. Will said that towns and states differed on that front. Hussain expressed concern that fiber was being buried on Route 8A. **He** said burying fiber had proved difficult in the past in Hawley. There was brief discussion of the location of the MBI middle-mile connections. Clearly, Chris said, there was still work to do.

There being no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 9:31 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Tinky **Weisblat**,
Gal Friday

Williams Cosby

Hussain Hamdan

Robert MacLean