

1 **TOWN OF CHESTER SELECTBOARD MEETING**
2 **September 3, 2024, Minutes**

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4 **Board Members Present:** Lee Gustafson, Arne Jonynas, Arianna Knapp, Tim Roper, and Peter
5 Hudkins at Town Hall.

6
7 **Staff Present:** Julie Hance, Town Manager, at Town Hall.

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9 **Visitors Present:** None.

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11 **Call to Order**

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13 Chair Arne Jonynas called the meeting to order at 5:58 p.m.

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15 **Agenda Item 1, Approval of Minutes from the Selectboard Retreat dated July 29, 2024**

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17 Lee moved and Arianna seconded a motion to approve the minutes of July 29, 2024. Arne said
18 there was also a video recording of the meeting. Arne skimmed them and Arianna said it looked
19 good. It was noted there was a blank on page four that should have read Naomi Johnson. Tim
20 didn't read every word but noted Sue had done a fabulous job. The only change was to replace the
21 blank on page four with "Naomi Johnson". The motion carried and the minutes were approved, as
22 amended.

23
24 **Agenda Item 2, Citizens Comments**

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26 There were no comments, as no citizens were present. Julie noted all meetings must have a Zoom
27 option and the recording must be posted on the site for 30 days following approval of the minutes,
28 per Vermont law. It will be posted on the town website.

29
30 **Agenda Item 3, Recap and Follow Up of Board Retreat**

31
32 Arne said it was time well spent and helpful to speak with the department heads who are involved
33 in the day-to-day workings of the town. They were able to share concerns and questions about
34 what was going on in the town and what was important in their lives. Arne appreciated being able
35 to put a name with a face and have a conversation. Although it was still a meeting and formal,
36 people seemed more at ease to have a one-on-one conversation in that setting. Arne hoped
37 everyone would come away with things that were helpful and that they learned as he had. Arne
38 asked what the other members wanted to share. Peter found listening to Steve from the Recreation
39 Department sounded like they were doing the most with the least and he was very impressed with
40 that. Tim's biggest takeaway was the overall quality of the managers, who are spectacular, and
41 found them dedicated and knowledgeable and that they wanted to expand their knowledge further.
42 Julie added they were a great group. Tim thought they were fortunate and appreciated all of them.
43 Tim had never met Steve before the retreat, and he had made a great impression. Julie said Steve
44 was an amazing hire who can build anything from his experience in the construction industry.
45 Steve and Matt work well together, and Matt is talented, as well. Julie didn't think a lot of the
46 taxpayers understood how much is done without needing to contract out, like many other

1 municipalities must do. Julie said there were a lot of savings in all their departments because of
2 how much they can do themselves. Lee suggested, as budget season approached, letting people
3 know so they understand the value of the services by posting it to Facebook and/or putting in the
4 newsletter that they are getting a lot of bang for their buck and they're being frugal and providing
5 a lot in services than other towns their size. Tim suggested having public recognition on a quarterly
6 basis, such as a spotlight on the highway department which could help with public perception. Tim
7 said it would be the next best thing to being able to talk with them. Julie said they could line it up
8 with the quarterly newsletter. Arne said, as they were talking about numbers, it would be good
9 time to mention the people behind those numbers and combine the two. Arne noted it was an
10 attempt to get the information out there and put on record that this is how they feel about the town
11 and managers and for a little town, they do a lot. Arne has heard that from people passing through
12 and second homeowners about how much the town has to offer and as Lee said, they are as frugal
13 as possible. Arne agreed that Steve was a fantastic hire and helps all the departments. Peter agreed.
14 Tim mentioned speaking with Steve about an older car he was able to restore himself and Tim
15 found it impressive. Lee suggested doing a 15 or 30 second spot for marketing on one of their
16 services so people who are interested in visiting or purchasing are aware of who's here. Julie said
17 they don't do well marketing themselves and there is money allocated for marketing. Staff wise,
18 they are not qualified to do marketing but now with Hugh, they are a pretty good team on the
19 lister/zoning side and could start tackling stuff. Julie was aware of retired marketing experts in the
20 community who may be willing to donate some hours or for a nominal fee. Julie said hiring a
21 marketing firm could get expensive quickly, but she knew a lot of towns were looking at it. Arne
22 said a lot of it comes down to money and they had a little in the economic development fund. Arne
23 said most of what they hear about the town is positive. Taxing is an issue. Lee suggested someone
24 walking around the fall festival asking people what they think about the town. Lee turned to
25 Arianna, and she said her gears were turning. Arianna found the retreat so satisfying to ask
26 everyone about the roads and understand what each of the members bring to the table. Arne said
27 the conversation flows easier at the retreat and even a meeting like this where nobody is on Zoom
28 or in the room. Arne said it helps with the department heads and understanding how they all work.
29 Julie anticipated having a budget soon. Arne said it's easier to justify spending money because
30 they understand what goes on and why the department is there and does what it does. Arne said
31 it's difficult to make cuts. Lee thought that was why it was important to educate the public where
32 the money goes. Tim said even if all people don't use a service, it's part of the town. Julie noted a
33 lot of time there is discussion about whether the Rec Department is necessary, and she pointed out
34 it is if they want to attract families to support the school and everything is connected. Arne noted
35 the 7th grade class this year is 70 or 75 which is 10 or 20 more than they've had in recent years.
36 Arne said they have been considering ideas of how to deal with the extra enrollment and Tim said
37 that was a good problem to have as opposed to closing the school. Julie agreed. Tim said because
38 he was on the board, he has paid more attention to the budget than in past years and noticed the
39 department heads were the ones who came forward with ideas of how to save money. Julie agreed.
40 Tim added that they weren't trying to build a regime and Julie said they were all taxpayers in
41 Chester and that's what people needed to understand, that they're not looking for high taxes. Tim
42 noted Jeff rebuilt a pump for \$10,000 because they needed it done but it would have cost much
43 more for a new one. Arne said there were line items for everything in the budget and other
44 government agencies may not be so transparent. Tim thought people get confused between school
45 and municipal taxes and Julie agreed. Tim suggested trying to educate them about it. Julie said the
46 new Superintendent would likely come to a Selectboard meeting and that she and he had met a

1 few times. Julie said he is interested in that topic and discussed going back to the annual school
2 meeting being the same night as Town Meeting. They don't vote on their budget that same night
3 but present it and they would get far more people. It may make for a longer night, but they could
4 consider moving it to a Saturday or even a Friday night. Monday night at 6 pm can be difficult for
5 families to attend. Julie suggested a unified presentation with the school board for the taxpayers to
6 see and eliminate possible redundancy. Arne said it also affects other towns: Cavendish, Ludlow,
7 and Andover. Arne said some recommendations are moving the 6th graders to the high school
8 because of overcrowding at the elementary school and there were hotly debated topics coming up.
9 Peter thought there should be community use of the gymnasium. Julie said they were interested in
10 having those conversations and the message that there was communication. She said some people
11 get frustrated because they feel that everyone is working in a bubble and sometimes people are
12 content to know it's been discussed. Tim pointed out that people often tend to only come to budget
13 meetings. Lee agreed. Julie wanted to communicate better during the budget process but wasn't
14 sure how. Peter suggested the survey that was done for the planning board. Tim and Arne thought
15 it would get people talking and involve them. Lee said people would be able to see it by having
16 the people responsible for spending the money presenting. Julie thought it was a good idea.
17 Arianna wondered if they should target the general election for a survey when people are there
18 because of the presidential election. Julie agreed that could be done but asked what the goal of the
19 survey and the questions would be. Tim said to get public input and what services were important
20 and mentioned the Planning Commission asked about quality of life and what was important to
21 them. Then they would have data to support the money spent. Lee said they did a survey for the
22 COVID money and it was a similar process. Arianna said they could use a survey to put
23 information out and based on the information provided, ask a question. Lee suggested asking them
24 if they were a town manager, where they would spend the money and make cuts. Julie said if they
25 wanted to do a survey for November, they needed to get started on it. Tim would love to take it on
26 but had a lot on his plate. Julie suggested they all think of a couple of questions and email them to
27 her. Arianna said they are exploring the possibility of conducting a survey if they can find someone
28 to drive it, but in the meantime, they would send Julie their thoughts of what it could include but
29 would not commit to doing one yet. The others agreed. Julie said she's not great at drafting survey
30 questions because hers are usually leading. Arne asked if there was still ARPA money and Julie
31 said about \$160,000 and by the end of the year, they need to allocate it.

32
33 Julie anticipated presenting the first budget draft to the board by the end of October. She asked if
34 they wanted her to give it as usual. Tim thought they should start letting people know and
35 encourage their involvement. They thought there may be more involvement this time around.
36 Arianna asked if they felt comfortable stating at the October and November Selectboard meetings
37 they will consider certain elements of the budget. Julie said Amy posts for every meeting on their
38 Facebook page, but they could also put a header on the agendas about the budget discussion.
39 Arianna said they were starting down Lee's road of communicating. Arne thought most people
40 were satisfied with how they spend money and had not heard a big swelling of complaints. Peter
41 said once you tell them they're paying for the public service building, they understand. The next
42 big bomb would be the grader. Julie said suddenly there is a lot of money flowing. The state
43 received billions in ARPA funds and now realizes the programs have been too restrictive and if
44 they don't want to give the money back, they must obligate their funds. Programs like the hazard
45 mitigation grant program which is normally 25/75 are now 100. They are looking for projects that
46 cost a million dollars plus. Arianna asked if the dam would fall under it and Julie said they hadn't

1 decided as a board if they were retiring the dam. Julie said they have applications with a pretty
2 strong position of getting the First Avenue pump station and force main funded. If they could get
3 it 100% funded, it would be huge. Tim said the wastewater treatment system was at or near
4 capacity and they had the opportunity to attract a business such as a brewery, it would help with
5 business development and Julie agreed. She said they have three grant applications for different
6 road projects and a grant in for the pump station and force main and it would be helpful. They had
7 applied for a \$700,000 grant for the library, which was 100% and was for energy efficiency,
8 handicap accessibility, and new carpeting and it was submitted in the spring. They submitted 100%
9 grant for AFG (Assistance to Firefighters Grant) to pay for the new radios needed for all the
10 departments and would fund Mike becoming a paramedic and his salary for three years. She hoped
11 they could get one or two of the grants and would give the board a list of the projects and grants
12 applied for. Arne asked about the sidewalk and Julie hoped it would be done before she retired.
13 They have dealt with the rail easement for four years. The cost has doubled because it was two
14 years before COVID. The last email Julie sent was a few months ago that they have until the next
15 round of funding opens or she will nix the sidewalk across the rail that they wanted, and she doesn't
16 have to do. She noted pedestrians cross the rail daily and that got some momentum. The next round
17 of funding would open in December. Arne said the whole project was extensive and maybe they
18 could get away with something simpler.

19
20 Through FEMA, Julie had a meeting last week and would add it to the grant list for the next
21 meeting. She said they have some roads eligible for 406 mitigations through FEMA. Smokeshire
22 Road was a prime example and had cost \$239,000 and FEMA reimbursed them and then they can
23 apply for 406 mitigation, and it would be 100% funded. Smokeshire, Popple Dungeon, and Lovers
24 Lane are all big ones. Kirby and Julie are looking to see what projects fit within that allotted
25 amount of money and are applying. Peter said there are multiple people on the transportation
26 advisory and if he could get a little more information about where Julie was, he could advocate for
27 it. Julie will provide Peter with a list. Peter asked her to keep him informed by the last Wednesday
28 of the month.

29
30 Lee asked about the alert system and wondered if they could use it to send out information about
31 the budget and Julie said they don't want to overuse it, or people won't use it. She thought with
32 Facebook and the election, they would have opportunity to get the word out.

33
34 Arne thought they were on a good path when they take each department by itself. Arne didn't
35 know of any other way to get people more involved. Julie said the recordings would also be on the
36 website and she was considering being more descriptive in the budget and breaking each line down,
37 but it could get big fast, and she didn't know that that was the issue but asked the board to let her
38 know. Tim said it takes a while for people who move here to get used to some things and Julie said
39 they are the people she would like to reach out to who are new to the area and to Vermont and are
40 the ones who typically have questions. Tim suggested welcome packets and Julie said they have
41 one that they send out. Tim wanted to see it.

42
43 Arne thought now having the meetings in a smaller room would help with the conversation.

44
45 **Agenda Item 4, Executive Session: Evaluation of a Public Official pursuant to 1 VSA § 313 (a)(4)**

46
47 Arne entertained a motion to go into executive session for the evaluation of a public official

1 pursuant to 1 VSA § 313 (a)(4). They invited Julie to join them. Lee moved and Arianna seconded
2 it. The motion carried unanimously.

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4 (Entered executive session at 6:50 p.m.)

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6 Lee moved and Arianna seconded a motion to exit executive session. The motion carried.

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8 (Executive session exited at 8:05 p.m.)

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10 **Agenda Item 5, Adjourn**

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12 Lee moved and Arianna seconded a motion to adjourn. The motion carried and the meeting was
13 adjourned at 8:05 p.m.

DRAFT