

Select Board Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, November 14, 2023
Stow Town Building & Zoom

Present in the Warren Room: Cortni Frecha, Megan Birch-McMichael, Hector Constantzos, John "JT" Toole, and Town Administrator Denise Dembkoski

Absent: Ingeborg Hegemann Clark

Chair Frecha called the meeting to order at 7 p.m.

Public Comment - none

Board Member Comments

Mr. Constantzos acknowledged that November is Native American Heritage Month.

Ms. Frecha said the Wreaths for Veterans group is inviting residents to the 4th Annual Laying of Wreaths for Veterans on Saturday, December 16 at 11 a.m. in Brookside Cemetery. The goal is to have a wreath for each of the 400 veterans laid to rest in Stow. Non-decorated wreaths can be dropped off on the bench at 453 Great Road on or before Thursday, December 14, or ordered from the Boy Scouts' website at troop1stow.net.

Mr. Toole acknowledged the breakfast for veterans held on Veterans Day and thanked everyone involved. He said the most moving part was the Quilts of Valor presentation of a quilt to each veteran.

Town Administrator (TA) Report

- There is now a clothing and textile recycling bin at Pompo, for items in any condition as long as they are clean, dry, and bagged. We may get a second or a larger bin as it is being filled each week.
- The school project will receive an increased amount per square foot from the MSBA (MA School Building Authority) due to inflation. At this time the new amount is not known, but the MSBA did vote to increase it.
- The Gleasondale Bridge is expected to be completed on Friday, with paving being done this week. There will be some minor work around the bridge for a canoe launch.
- The TA recognized the Police Department, specifically Chief Sallese and Phoenix Dwyer, for their work to obtain a federal grant which supports agencies seeking accreditation. The \$139,278 grant will be used towards equipment for accreditation such as evidence and gun lockers, cameras, policy management software, personnel costs associated with being a part of the accreditation team, and a specialized accreditation conference for all members of the team.
- The TA recognized the Rotary Club and the Fire Department for their work on the breakfast for veterans. There were about 35 veterans in attendance with their families, along with town officials, state officials, and the Quilts of Valor group. It was a beautiful and overwhelming presentation. Pictures can be found on the town's Facebook page.
- Next Wednesday, November 22, is Assistant TA/HR Director Dolores Hamilton's last day with us. She is going to another community and it will be a huge loss for us here.
- Town Building and municipal buildings will be closed on Thursday, November 23 and Friday, November 24 for the Thanksgiving holiday. The TA hopes everyone has a happy and healthy Thanksgiving.

Appointment to Highway Department

Jon DeVries was present via Zoom. Mr. DeVries thanked the Board for considering him for the role.

Ms. Birch-McMichael moved to appoint Jon DeVries to the position of Laborer for the Stow Highway Department. Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

Meeting Minutes

Ms. Birch-McMichael moved to accept the meeting minutes of the October 24, 2023 meeting as drafted. Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

Ms. Birch-McMichael moved to accept the meeting minutes of the October 30, 2023 meeting as drafted. Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed 3-0-1 with Chair Frecha abstaining.

Authorize Change of Employee Health Plan

Mr. Toole recused himself from this discussion and vote.

After an increase of 13.75% for this current fiscal year, the Minuteman Nashoba Health Group (MNHG) is also expecting a large increase for the upcoming year. MNHG is trying to make up for years of underfunding its plans. Nine of the 13 communities with MNHG are looking to leave, and as a result MNHG will not be able to sustain a group trust and would face an approximate \$5M deficit. If they dissolve as a trust, the deficit will be apportioned to the 13 entities based on enrollment and participation. This would result in an article in next year's town meeting to cover the deficit cost.

A few months ago, administration brought on a health insurance consultant to research what options are available for Stow, and the plan being recommended is through MIIA. It has the same plan design, deductibles, and copayments. Although it does not need to be negotiated, the unions were brought into the discussion and are receptive to the change. All of our insurance, property and casualty and health insurance, will now be through MIIA which is an MMA (MA Municipal Association) subsidiary.

Ms. Birch-McMichael moved to authorize a change to the employee health plan from the Minuteman Nashoba Health Group (MNHG) to the Massachusetts Interlocal Insurance Agency (MIIA) effective for FY 2025.

Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously (3-0).

Mr. Toole returned to the meeting at 7:17 p.m.

FY24 Tax Classification Public Hearing – 7:15 p.m.

Chair Frecha read the public hearing notice:

The Select Board will hold a public hearing on Tuesday, November 14, 2023 at 7:15 p.m. in the Town Building, 380 Great Road, Stow, MA on the issue of tax classification. The purpose of the hearing is to allow taxpayers the opportunity to present their views on whether or not Residential, Commercial, Industrial, Open Space, and Personal Property should be taxed with one rate for all property classes, or to use different tax rates for different property classes.

The hearing will include a presentation by the Board of Assessors outlining the options available under Chapter 40, Section 56 of the Massachusetts General Laws. At the conclusion of the public hearing the Select Board shall determine whether or not tax classification shall be applied for the Fiscal Year 2024 tax rate. Currently the Town taxes at a single tax rate for all property classes.

All concerned taxpayers are encouraged to attend, either in person or via Zoom, to present their views orally or submit them in writing to the office.

Ms. Birch-McMichael moved to enter into a public hearing on the Fiscal Year 2024 Tax Classification. Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously by roll call vote.

Principal Assessor Kristin Fox was present via Zoom. Ms. Fox reminded everyone that any and all tax rates discussed are still subject to approval by the Department of Revenue. Ms. Fox explained that the Select Board can maintain a single tax rate or adopt a split tax rate, and she explained three additional options of a small commercial exemption, an open space discount, or a residential exemption that the Select Board can grant.

A residential tax rate of 1 would yield a single tax rate; selecting a minimum residential factor of less than 1 would shift the tax burden to the CIP classes (Commercial, Industrial, and Personal properties). Historically Stow has chosen a minimum residential factor of 1.

Charlie Hartford, 95 Taylor Road, said that a rate change would be counterintuitive due to the small percentage of commercial and industrial zoned land.

Tom Ryan, 453 Great Road (and Board of Assessors member) said we have been going the wrong way with commercial and industrial for years, and are now at about 95% residential. If we raise the taxes on just businesses and switch the rate, we will probably drive what little businesses we have out of town.

Len Golder, member of the Board of Assessors, said he agrees with Mr. Ryan and said that there is not enough business to separate it into two classifications.

Steve Quirk, 18 Center Place, said we need to help businesses as much as we can.

Ms. Birch-McMichael moved that the public hearing on the Fiscal Year 2024 Tax Classification be closed. Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously by roll call vote.

Ms. Birch-McMichael moved, based on information from the Board of Assessors, that the Town of Stow adopt a minimum residential factor of 1, to keep a single tax rate for fiscal year 2024, taxing all property classes at one rate.

Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

Draft of Recording of Meetings Policy

The Board discussed transparency, and how part of being on a board or committee means full transparency. If virtual meetings are continued then people should be able to see them. As a Select Board they can only recommend, in the interest of full transparency, that other elected boards follow this policy. The Board discussed ad hoc committees and whether they should record meetings. The Board discussed adding the recording of meetings to the motion when creating a new committee. There are approximately 25 Zoom accounts in use and multiple Owl recording devices available for recording purposes. For meetings that are only via Zoom, there is an option to record the meeting, which can then be uploaded for viewing. The Board discussed creating a bylaw from this policy.

Ms. Birch-McMichael moved to approve the Recording of Meetings Policy with the following amendment: in section 2 to be renamed "all other Boards and Committees and Ad Hoc Committees..." Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

PERSONNEL POLICIES

Asst TA Hamilton had convened a Policy Committee comprised of Kristen Fox (Principal Assessor), Tina McAndrew (Library Director), and Kathy Sferra (Conservation Director) to review policies. All the draft policies were sent out to all employees on October 31 asking for feedback, questions, or comments.

Draft of Remote Work Policy

As a result of the pandemic, many job seekers want a flexible schedule. This policy will assist with recruitment as it could set a regular schedule that includes remote work, and is an employee benefit that is of no cost to the Town. It is a very specific policy and many positions will not qualify. Discussion ensued about the requirements in section B but no changes were made.

Ms. Birch-McMichael moved to approve the Remote Work Policy as presented at this meeting.

Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) Policy

A short discussion ensued about this policy. Regarding volunteers, those that work with vulnerable populations are required to have a CORI check. These are done every three years, except for summer seasonal employees who are CORI checked annually if they return the next summer.

Ms. Birch-McMichael moved to approve the Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) Policy as presented at this meeting.

Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

Compensatory Policy for Exempt Employees

The Town is not obligated to offer comp time to exempt employees, but different practices have been used over the years. This is a starting point to standardize the process. There are some allowances and some flexibility depending on the situation. After discussing the requirement of using comp time within three months of its accrual, the Board added "...or at the discretion of the Town Administrator" to the Procedures section on page two. Ms. Demboski asked to amend the first page by removing the last sentence of the second paragraph under Policy Description.

Mr. Toole recused himself three minutes into the discussion at 8:12 p.m. and returned at 8:20 p.m.

Ms. Birch-McMichael moved to approve the Compensatory Policy for Exempt Employees with the amendments as discussed.

Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously (3-0).

Compensatory Policy for Non-Exempt Employees

This policy is for hourly employees who are not covered under a union contract.

Ms. Birch-McMichael moved to approve the Compensatory Policy for Non-Exempt Employees as presented at this meeting.

Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

Inclement Weather Policy

This is to clarify the process because employees were following different procedures for inclement weather days; this will provide a fair and consistent procedure.

*Ms. Birch-McMichael moved to approve the Inclement Weather Policy as presented at this meeting.
Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.*

Religious Accommodation Policy

Discussion ensued about safety and legality. The Board revised the policy scope to include "... undue hardship, danger, or liability for employees or residents in the Town of Stow."

Ms. Birch-McMichael moved to approve the Religious Accommodation Policy with amendments as discussed at this meeting.

Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

Nepotism Policy

Mr. Toole recused himself at 8:34 p.m.

The Board changed the first sentence of the Policy Description to be: "...only if the following conditions apply."

Ms. Birch-McMichael moved to approve the Nepotism Policy with the amendment discussed at this meeting.

Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously (3-0).

Mr. Toole returned to the meeting at 8:38 p.m.

Small Jet Expansion at Hanscom Field (continued discussion) - tabled

Board Correspondence & Updates

Mr. Toole noted that reference to MGL 32B was included in the letter from the MSA (MA Select Board Association) to Lt. Gov. Kim Driscoll. The letter was in response to the administration asking for feedback on how to improve operations in municipalities.

Mr. Constantzos asked about the letter from Stantec regarding the feasibility study for public water in Lower Village. The TA said this is phase one of the overall study, and this initial report is their test well report based on testing at two town-owned locations. There is more work to be done for the study.

Adjournment

At 8:48 p.m. Ms. Birch-McMichael moved to adjourn.

Mr. Constantzos seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Joyce Sampson,

Executive Assistant

Documents used at this meeting:

Documents can be found in the Select Board Office in the meeting folder.