

## 2024 ANNUAL TOWN MEETING OF ATHENS, VERMONT

March 4, 2024 at 6:00pm at the Athens Community Center

82 voters attending

Called to order at 6:00 pm

The moderator reads the warning and reviews the rules of order for the meeting.

### **Article 1: To act on the town report**

Dennis Mirante says the budget is \$10,000 higher than the proposed budget from last year and the budget was rejected twice last year.

Ellen Mirante says that she did a comparison of highway department employees and benefits from other local towns according to population and miles of road. She says Athens is a “Farm Team” not a Major League and can’t be expected to compete with bigger towns. She thinks the selectboard needs to take fiduciary responsibility for taxpayers' benefit. She recommends the town switch from BCBS to MVP for health insurance.

### **Article 2: To see if the Town shall vote to authorize the Selectboard to borrow money, if necessary, for current expenses in anticipation of collection of taxes**

*Motion made by Don Capponcelli; seconded by Mike Perry.*

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

### **Article 3: To see if the Town shall vote to collect taxes on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 2024**

*Motion by Carol Bingham; seconded by Denise Randall.*

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

### **Article 4: To see if the Town shall vote to publish a list of delinquent taxpayers in the Town Report**

*Motion by Denise Randall; seconded by Sandi Capponcelli.*

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

### **Article 5: To see if the Town shall vote to approve \$643,357.36, with \$545,897.36 to be raised by taxes, to defray Town expenditures**

*Motion by Sandi Capponcelli, seconded by Carol Bingham.*

Discussion:

Dennis Mirante asks if the total budget includes the voted appropriations of \$6,700. It does not.

Linda Taylor asks if there is a figure for the annual payment on the new grader. Hannah says it’s ~\$10,600. Linda asks why the selectboard wanted to get rid of the old grader at this time. Janet answers that there was a lot wrong with the old grader. An equipment mechanic looked it over and gave a ballpark figure on what it would cost to fix it.

Danny Taylor says the budget is up \$60,000, plus the rubbish removal if it’s approved.

Sherry Maher asks if there's a way to tease out how the town adhered to the budget last year. Hannah goes over the budget and actual columns in the budget pages in the town report. Both revenues and expenses are higher than budgeted, mostly due to highway grants that are applied for during the year.

Tom Taylor asks about the age and hours on the new grader. He wants to know how the equipment fund can cover unexpected costs on that and other pieces of equipment. Janet answers that the new grader was a good deal and held its value for trade in.

Dennis Mirante says Athens will spend the same amount on a new truck than any other town will. He says they have to find a less expensive way to do what needs to be done in the town. He points out 6 items that increased in the salaries and benefits section. He wants to know what the town is getting for that. Denise says the clerk was increased to two days a week plus additional work. The selectboard has also looked into offering disability insurance, something that was lacking for Eugene when he needed it. Krista details some of the work that Hannah has been doing in her positions.

Tom Taylor asks a question on the unreserved balance in the equipment fund. Hannah says it was money spent that wasn't in one of the earmarked categories.

*Put to a vote by paper ballot: 52 YES; 30 NO. The budget is approved.*

**Article 6: Shall the voters authorize the selectboard to expend the funds in the Town Office Renovation Fund on projects including the Athens Community Center, Town Garage and Town Office**

*Motion by Sandi Capponcelli, seconded by Krista Gay.*

Discussion:

Linda Linblad asks if the money for renovations might include outside lighting for the driveway up to the Community Center. Sandi Capponcelli says that is a good suggestion to take into consideration.

Dennis Mirante says that 14 years ago, a town office renovation committee was formed. He says that it was an idea then to move the town office to the community center. He thinks that money from the restoration fund should come to the community center, not anywhere else.

Don Capponcelli says that the amount in the reserve fund won't get very far with the community center, but the intent was to use the funds as grant matching. David says that the vote is needed to change how dedicated funds can be used and there are various building projects happening.

Ellen Mirante also thinks the town should focus on the community center building.

Tim Stevenson asks if what Dennis said could be made into an ammendment. David says someone could amend the article.

*Dennis Mirante amends the article to take the town office renovation funds and make them available only to the community center; Ellen Mirante seconds.*

Discussion on the ammendment:

Krista asks if the money is tied up to the community center, if it will affect getting grants for the town garage. Sandi says it might, and it's not enough to do very much in the community center. Sandi thinks it should be available for multiple situations.

There is additional discussion about the community center renovation and town office relocation project.

Sherry says the town owns four buildings, including the Meetinghouse, which isn't on this list.

Kate Bova asks how much is left in the fund and who would be determining where it would be allocated. There is \$24,253 in the fund. David says the selectboard is responsible for all expenditures.

Mike Bates says the roof on the current town office has a very old roof and may need some funds soon to replace it. Mike points out that is where the town records are now.

Danny Taylor asks why the town doesn't budget for building or equipment maintenance. Janet says they cut the budget hard last year and that was kept in mind when preparing this year's budget, knowing townspeople can't afford repairs. Sandi says it's the way the town has been run for ever — to wait until something breaks and then fix it with a band aid.

Tina White says that she doesn't like the suggestion that the money will only be used if the town gets grants. She says there are immediate issues in all the buildings that need attention. Sandi says the town has been scoping the larger projects to apply for grants. She doesn't want money to be spent on things that will just be torn out as part of a bigger renovation. There is a necessary process to go through.

Krista says she agrees it's important to hold the selectboard accountable for how money is spent, and she reminds people that the article is simply for voters to authorize the selectboard to spend the funds, not to decide exactly how they are spent. She asks the voters to focus on the amended article.

Dennis Mirante says that he doesn't want to neglect the old town office, but he does want to see projects happen.

*Phil Morgan moves to end debate. Sandi Capponcelli seconds.*

*Voice vote to end debate: Approved*

*The amendment is put to a voice vote: Defeated*

*The original article is put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 7: Shall licenses for the sale of malt beverages, vinous beverages, and ready-to-drink spirits beverages be granted in this town**

*Motion by Denise Randall, seconded by Krista Gay.*

Discussion:

Dennis Mirante asks what is meant by sale. He says he understands people want wine to be delivered to their house but doesn't understand why the wording is about selling alcohol.

David says that alcohol sales would be regulated by the Vermont Department of Liquor Control and a local Alcohol Control Board. Krista Gay says it also covers events with catering and cash bars.

David says that some time ago Athens was one of seven towns that were dry. Now it is one of three.

Kate Bova says that Athens was not always a dry town. She heard that sometime in the 80s, someone in town had a bed and breakfast and wanted a little pub in it. The townspeople didn't want that and voted to not allow liquor sales, just for that one case.

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 8: Shall spirits and fortified wines be sold in this town**

*Motion by Denise Randall, seconded by Krista Gay.*

Discussion:

Lynn asks how this is different from the previous article. Krista says there is a difference between wines and hard liquor.

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 9: To see if the town shall vote to have trash and recycling pickup, starting in June 2024, as a weekly service with every other week being trash and alternating weeks being recycling, for a total amount of \$32,885.94**

*Motion by Carol Bingham, seconded by Krista Gay.*

Discussion:

Treah Pichette asks why the cost is just a tiny bit higher than the current year with every other week service. It's because the service changes in May each year, so there was a half year of full service before it was cut with the budget in 2023. Comparison of a whole year of the two different levels of service is about \$5,000.

Elmer Davis asks if anyone looked into doing trash the same way Brookline does with dumpsters. Krista answers that the problem is that people wouldn't be responsible with making sure the trash got to the collection location. David says last time it was looked into, the cost was about the same as pickup.

Ellen Mirante says that there are options in Westminster three days a week and costs \$2.00 a bag. David corrects Ellen that it is the town of Rockingham, not Westminster and the cost is \$4.00/bag plus \$35/year for a sticker.

John Oberling says it makes more sense to have one truck come to town than to have 100 cars go to Bellows Falls.

Matt Shea asks to clarify if the decision is to add service for ~\$5,000 or stay with the current level of service. Hannah says that if the article is voted down, there would not be trash collection at all after May.

David says there is no money for trash pickup in the budget. It has been put in as a separate article for voters to decide. Mark Berman asks what the \$13,524 in the budget is for. It is to complete the current contract through May. Mark asks if the revenue for trash bags might increase slightly if the trash service increased. Krista points out that trash bags can be purchased another day at the town office and at the Saxtons River Market now.

Mike Bates asks for clarification on the actual budget figure for the trash if the article is passed. Hannah says the \$32,885 figure will replace the \$13,524 that is in the budget currently. The net increase would be ~\$19,000.

*Elmer Davis amends the motion to have trash pickup once a month and recycling pickup once a month for a figure of \$27,452.72;*

Kate Bova asks if an amendment can be made so that if the article is voted down, the trash service stays the same as it is now.

*Danny Taylor seconds the amendment.*

*Put to a voice vote: Defeated*

Sherry Maher asks to clarify the article. A yes vote adds ~\$19,000 to the current budget and increases trash service. A no vote means there wouldn't be any trash service after May.

Krista says that other options have been looked at, and there are serious accessibility and health concerns for leaving trash disposal up to individual citizens.

*Phil Morgan moves to end debate. Krista seconds. Put to a voice vote: approved*

*Original article put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 10: Shall the Town of Athens discontinue use of the Australian ballot system to elect officers, and instead elect its town officers from the floor at all future annual and special town meetings, pursuant to 17 VSA § 2680(b)**

*Motion by Tim Stevenson, seconded by Denise Randall.*

A paper ballot is requested.

Discussion:

Sandi reads a statement opposed to the article because the town's voting numbers are up with the use of Australian ballots and participation is accessible for more people.

Tim Stevenson says Town Meeting is the essence of democracy and he doesn't want to erode it further by having officers elected by Australian ballot. He thinks there is value in having people stand up and declare their interest in running for office and it's important to return to that method.

Kate Bova says that she thought campaigning from the floor isn't allowed. Krista clarifies that if someone is nominated from the floor, they can address the body.

Zech Wicker says he agrees with Sandi. He thinks a democracy is government by as many people as can be involved, so if the engagement has gone up with Australian ballots, that would be a more democratic method.

Dennis says it's hypocritical to look out for people who can't get out to take care of their trash, but not people who can't get out to vote.

John says it's optional and a privilege to come to town meeting, but it's a *right* to vote. Australian balloting from 10-7 gives people a chance to vote. He doesn't feel good about disenfranchising fellow citizens of their right to vote. He says the town can do both Town Meeting and have Australian ballot voting.

Lynn Morgan asks if this article was a petition or from the selectboard. David says there was a petition which had some incorrect wording in it, so the selectboard rejected the petition and put this article on the warning.

Sherry Maher says she's been struggling with this and has looked at past data. In 2021 everything happened by Australian ballot, so this is the third year. She says that two of the current Meetinghouse committee members were nominated from the floor. She reads the voter turnout for the last several years. Athens' town meeting participation is always higher than the state average. She says she is going to vote no on this article.

Debbie Wicker says she couldn't be here tonight if she couldn't get someone to cover her shift at work. She will vote against it.

Linda Linblad says not all eligible voters in town can even fit in the Community Center. She also says not everyone can make Town Meeting.

Tim Stevenson reviews the surveys that were done to find a time for town meeting. He says that the main reason was because people don't think their voices matter. He wants the committee to be resurrected to determine what can be done to encourage and bring out more people.

*Matt Perry moves to end debate. Seconded. Put to a voice vote: Approved*

*The article is put to a vote by paper ballot: 21 YES; 60 NO. The Article has been defeated.*

**Article 11: To see if the Town shall vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$3,500.00 for the annual maintenance of its cemeteries**

*Motion by Don Capponcelli, seconded by Sandi Capponcelli.*

Don answers a question about what type of maintenance is done on the cemeteries.

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 12: Shall the voters of Athens approve the sum of \$2,500.00 for the purpose of maintaining the Athens Brick Meetinghouse**

*Motion by Sherry Maher, seconded by Tim Stevenson.*

Discussion:

Sherry points out that this amount is the same as what has been part of the general budget in the past. It was cut to \$600 last year as part of the budget cuts. She says that this amount will be important to maintain the building. Recent projects include leveling the floor and doing moisture mitigation. She thanks the voters for all the support in the past and hopes people will approve the motion.

Ellen Mirante says Sherry does a great job. Ellen would like to see the one window in the town office replaced.

Dennis thanks the selectboard.

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 13: To see if the Town shall vote to appropriate the sum of \$1,140.00 for the support of Southeastern Vermont Economic Development Strategies (SeVEDS) to provide workforce and economic coordination services to the Windham Region**

*Motion by Denise Randall, seconded by Don Capponcelli.*

Discussion:

Kate Bova says she would like to know what SeVEDS is.

Don Capponcelli says SeVEDS helped the town and asks Rachel Shields Ebersole to share more. Rachel says they supported the town with grants for the garage and community center scoping work; they have assisted a local business; they work with high school students to graduate, stay in Vermont and work. They also help new Americans and refugees to find housing and employment. SeVEDS asks town to support them at \$3.00 per resident.

Krista Gay thanks Rachel for coming to long meetings and being a trooper on behalf of the town.

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 14: To see if the Town shall vote to raise, appropriate, and expend the sum of \$500.00 (\$1.31 per Athens resident) for the support of Grace Cottage Family Health & Hospital**

*Motion by Denise Randall, seconded by Sandi Capponcelli.*

Discussion:

Don Capponcelli points out that the \$1.31 isn't a correct figure per resident.

*Krista Gay amends the motion to say "approximately \$1.31 per resident"*

*Amendment put to a voice vote: Approved*

*Amended article put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 15: To see if the Town shall vote to appropriate the sum of \$250.00 to support the Womens' Freedom Center to provide quality advocacy and support to the women of Athens**

*Motion by Tim Stevenson, seconded by Krista Gay.*

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 16: To see if the Town shall vote to appropriate the sum of \$330.00 to support Youth Services to serve the needs of youth and families in and around Windham County**

*Motion by Denise Randall, seconded by Sandi Capponcelli.*

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 17: To see if the Town shall vote to raise and appropriate \$1,000.00 to Southeastern Vermont Community Action (SEVCA) to assist Athens in responding to the emergency needs of the community and providing all available and applicable services**

*Motion by Denise Randall, seconded by Sherry Maher.*

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 18: To see if the Town shall vote to appropriate the sum of \$250.00 for the Bellows Falls Senior Center**

*Motion by Denise Randall, seconded by Sandi.*

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 19: To see if the Town shall vote to appropriate the sum of \$1,350.00 to help support the home health, maternal and child health, and hospice care provided in patient's homes and in community settings by the Visiting Nurse Association & Hospice of Vermont and New Hampshire**

*Motion by Sherry Maher, seconded by Tim Stevenson.*

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 20: To see if the Town shall vote to raise and appropriate \$1,000.00 to assist Grafton Cares in providing a variety of assistance to the people of Athens**

*Motion by Denise Randall, seconded by Krista Gay.*

Krista Gay thanks Kate and the other volunteers for doing everything they do to bring the community together.

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 21: To see if the Town shall vote to appropriate the sum of \$356.00 to help support outpatient, mental health, and substance abuse service by the staff of Health Care & Rehabilitation Services (HCRS) in accordance with 24 V. S. A. § 2691**

*Motion by Denise Randall, seconded by Sandi Capponcelli.*

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 22: To see if the Town shall vote to raise and appropriate the sum of \$300.00 to assist Senior Solutions**

*Motion by Don Capponcelli, seconded by Amanda Alsvig.*

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 23: To see if the Town shall vote to appropriate the sum of \$250.00 to Bull Creek Common Lands to support local land conservation and public access in the Bull Creek watershed**

*Motion by Denise Randall, seconded by Sandi Capponcelli.*

Discussion:

Kate Bova says that if people haven't gone yet and investigated the lovely trails that the Bull Creek board and volunteers have made in the community forest, they should go check it out and take a walk.

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 24: To set the time of future town meetings**

*Don Capponcelli moves to have Town Meeting on the Monday night before the first Tuesday in March, at 6:00pm. Seconded by Sherry Maher.*

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

**Article 25: To transact any further business proper to come before said meeting**

Hannah says the rabies clinic will be at the Town Office on Saturday from 1:30-3:00pm.

Lynn Morgan says there is a Green Up Day sign-up sheet in the back of the room.

Tina White encourages people to get goodies and make donations for the community center. The Easter egg hunt is on March 30 from 1:00-3:00.

*Motion to adjourn by Sandi Capponcelli, seconded by Denise Randall.*

*Put to a voice vote: Approved*

Adjourned at: 8:08



Respectfully submitted

\_\_\_\_\_  
Hannah Regier, Town Clerk

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Date

Approved by:

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Signature

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Office

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Date

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Signature

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Office

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