

Athens Selectboard Meeting Minutes

April 17, 2025

7:00pm at the Athens Town Office

In attendance: David Bemis, Sandi Capponcelli, Janet Perry, Krista Gay, Denise Randall (remote), Hannah Regier, Dennis Mirante, Ellen Mirante, FACT TV (Alex), Don Capponcelli, April Lyman, Sherry Maher

Called to order at 7:02

Adjustments to Agenda

None

Minutes of Prior Meeting

Sandi makes a motion to accept the minutes from the special and regular prior meeting. Krista seconds. Put to a vote: all five in favor.

Public Comments

Dennis asks what the special meeting was about and if there would be minutes. Hannah says that the minutes are on the website now, and that the reason for the meeting was that she has resigned. Dennis asks if the Rockingham recycling center is taking new customers. David says they are, and he reviews the costs. Dennis clarifies that he spoke with someone at the center and they said they would be happy to take more people from Athens. David says that Athens doesn't have a contract with Rockingham, but individual Athens residents can currently buy a pass and use the recycling center. Dennis asks where things stand with the equipment and labor sharing idea with Brookline. Sandi says there has been that one meeting. Janet says it might have been her who was supposed to meet with them. She thinks it sounded very cumbersome. Sandi thinks it isn't the best thing for Athens to do.

Ellen asks for the job descriptions for Road Foreman and Laborer. Krista says there is a description for Highway Laborer which was recently hired. Ellen also asks about a Windham Regional Commission chart, if any roads have been thrown up recently, and if the road and bridge letter can be mailed instead of driven to Dummerston using the town Truck. David says driving to Dummerston to fill out paperwork is the best practice. Ellen thinks that the 10-hour day summer hours are good to accommodate. For winter storms, she thinks days should be swapped out for extra work put in during a storm. She thinks it's important for the crew to take time off during the day to rest up before storms. She requests to have the highway employees provide transparency with a daily work schedule posted on a board in front of the town garage. This way they could be found if needed. Ellen wants to know when the town office roof will be replaced and how much it is going to cost. She has also noticed that the paint is peeling badly on the town office. She suggests that that work be done by volunteers, including the selectboard, this summer.

April Lyman thanks Hannah for her work for the town and that she will be missed.

Boards and Officials / Treasurer's Report / Ober Hill / Garage Project

Sherry says the Meetinghouse Committee has found there is a considerable amount of money available through Preservation Trust of Vermont to do the accessibility scoping work they want to do. Sherry has been in touch with Jon Saccoccio about the design and he can revise his work for \$7,850. Preservation Trust has committed to \$7,500 of that. She says the cost to the town would be minimal. The committee wants to move forward with the project and wants to ask the selectboard for approximately \$500 of town funds. David asks how much grant funding will be available for doing the actual work. Sherry says that will be a whole different project that they haven't gotten estimates for yet. David's idea for a back entrance has been taken off the table because the committee didn't think an entrance next to the stage area would be acceptable. They think that the new accessible entrance will be a primary entrance. Many people struggle with the uneven steps currently.

David makes a motion to authorize \$500, from the Meetinghouse Fund, provided the Preservation Trust will provide the \$7,500 towards the drawings. Sandi seconds.

Sherry says she has it in writing from Jenna that PTV is committed to the \$7,500 in funding.

Put to a vote: four in favor, Krista recuses.

Sherry says the Meetinghouse plant sale is scheduled for the 17th of May from 10 – 12.

Sherry says that the committee discussed the historic society will take on the cost of working with the Rich Earth Institute to bring a non-chemical porta-potty on site for the summer.

Don Capponcelli says he forgot to call the Cemtery Commission together for the regular April meeting. Their next meeting will be May 7th. He will need the info from Hannah for when their 12-month CD matures.

Hannah shares some information from Colin Bratton about the Ober Rd scoping project. The report should be complete in 2-3 weeks. There will be time for selectboard review and final revisions if needed. The cost-benefit analyses for the different options of this project did not pass the threshold needed to apply for the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. The HMGP seems to be going away now anyways with the Federal cuts. Funding has dried up and what is available is a lot more competitive. There isn't a next step right now for funding the project. Colin recommends waiting until the fall to see what funding is available.

Colin also recommends not starting any more big projects right now, and waiting until 2026 to ask for the structures grant that the town is getting to the top of the list for. The structures grant may be needed for either the Brookline Rd culvert or the Ober Rd bridge if other funding sources aren't available and/or costs are higher than currently expected.

The Brookline Rd culvert scoping study is ready to go out to bid. Colin recommends using the RFQ (Request for Qualifications) process instead of the at-the-ready process. Grafton recently used the state's preapproved "at-the-ready" process for engineering bids and the bids came in ~300% higher than expected. RFQ to RFP is a more competitive process, but will be multi-step. Colin's project management hours will cover the extra work.

David asks if the town turns down the bridges and structures grant this year if they will lose it for the next year. Hannah suggests David check with Colin for clarity on that.

Hannah says that once there are responses to the RFQ, there will need to be a committee of selectboard members to review the firms and choose which ones to ask for an RFP.

Denise is concerned about the Ober Rd project possibly not getting funded. Hannah says the TAP program is a possibility as is an ANR program, but those grants aren't open for applications right now.

David makes a motion to have Windham Regional Commission put out the RFQ for the Brookline Rd culvert. Krista seconds. Five in favor.

Hannah asks about where the \$15,000 for materials stockpile should be put in the budget. Sandi says the culvert inventory is fine now, so Matt wants the \$15k to go into the gravel budget. This can be used for either gravel or stone.

Hannah says that she has ordered the Listers' new laptop which was in the budget. Amber will work with All-Access to get it set up.

Janet says the Planning Commission has the informational meeting for the town plan at 7:00 next Tuesday (22nd) at the Community Center.

Sandi says she met with Matt today. Matt and Robbie went to a training in Greenfield, MA which they thought was useful. Matt will be applying for a blacktop grant and a structures grant – which he would like to use for a culvert at Athens Pond. There are at least six metal culverts on Route 35 that need to be replaced before new paving is laid. They are connecting culverts that might be eligible for a Better Roads grant. The work would need to be put out to bid because a trench box will be needed. Sandi says that Matt thinks now is the time to get out sand bids. The roads are basically in good condition. Big truck needs an EGR cooler replaced for ~\$4,000. Sandi looked into replacing Matt's laptop. All-Access quoted \$1,300. She doesn't think the town should spend that much on it. Walmart sells Chromebooks for \$179. Sandi doesn't think Matt needs a town domain email address since he doesn't use email much. David wants to keep Matt's email – it doesn't cost that much.

Sandi says she sent another letter to the Changs about the hedge.

David will talk to the school bus drivers about not using Mill Hill.

Sandi spoke with Katie Baily at VLCT about updating the town's procurement process. Katie says that the town's current policy is sufficient for now. Sandi asked the ethics commission about Don being project manager while she is on the selectboard and they were satisfied that the town had followed the law.

Sandi will ask Matt to get prices for the big truck repair from ATG as well as Twin State.

David makes a motion to sign the new account application for Twin State. Krista seconds. Put to a vote: five in favor.

Denise asks for an update on the purchase of the new little truck. Janet says that the last time she spoke with the salesman, which was a couple weeks ago, it was in the shop getting the back body done.

Sandi asks how the Chromebook should be purchased for Matt. Hannah says someone can send her a link for what to purchase with the credit card.

David makes a motion to sign weight permits for Plimpton Excavating, Structural Wood Corporation, Dead River, and Cota and Cota. Krista seconds. Put to a vote: all five in favor.

David makes a motion to sign the 2025 Windham Regional technical assistance request for the Grants in Aid (stormwater/ditching) program. Krista seconds. Put to a vote: all in favor.

Krista has reached out to the Rural School Alliance. Since the last meeting the Vermont house has voted on a school bill that imposes class sizes for each grade or else schools would be forced to close by the state. Even the largest class sizes ever in Grafton wouldn't meet the minimums. There might be a waiver process for geographically isolated schools. Krista says there is a real disconnect in Montpelier on what it actually means to be geographically disconnected by the physical nature of ridges and muddy dirt roads. Even Bellows Falls HS classes are under the minimums. Only Brattleboro would have enough students. The Rural School Alliance is advocating for small schools. Krista reads a statement from Cheryl Charles of the Westminster schoolboard (attached) who is leading the Rural Alliance. Westminster town has voted to join the alliance.

David makes a motion for the Town of Athens to join the Rural School Alliance. Sandi seconds.

Krista says the five goals of the Rural School Alliance are:

- 1. Educate young students*
- 2. Opportunities for older kids*
- 3. Keeping schools open*
- 4. Local school governance*
- 5. Funding reform*

Put to a vote: four in favor, Denise recuses.

Krista will let the alliance know and be the contact for the town. Hannah can put it on the town website.

The Community Center Easter egg hunt is on Saturday and the Easter Bunny himself will be there. There is a potluck from 1-3 for anyone.

Green Up is on May 3rd. People can contact Lynn Morgan to get an assigned route.

Don says that he went to put in the order with WW for the roofing materials, there was a \$500 freight charge on top of the materials. He went ahead and authorized that so that the crew could keep working. The purchase is \$804 higher than the initial materials estimate. Don says he would be more ready to get the whole project presentable by May 1st if the board wants to have a public meeting.

Sandi says that the application for the septic permit has been submitted to the state.

Hannah asks Don if he's keeping track of his hours. She wants to run a payroll with him in it before she leaves. Krista says it's important to pay him as he goes for all work he does to stay compliant.

Appointments

Sandi says that the town can't hire someone from outside town to fill the clerk and treasurer roles. David says that they could have a special town meeting to vote on an article to make these appointed positions. This will probably take 6 weeks to happen. Otherwise, someone from the town would need to be appointed to fill Hannah's roles until next town meeting.

Hannah suggests that the selectboard could create a new position and hire an admin person. Hannah shares some info from Cynthia Stoddard at NEMRC. NEMRC can step in, on an hourly basis, to be an interim treasurer if needed. Cynthia also suggested that the town could hire a bookkeeper and appoint/elect a treasurer in-name-only, who just signs checks. She recommends getting legal advice from VLCT before going that route. Another suggestion she had was to reach out to part-time treasurers in other small towns who might want to take on another town. Hannah says this is just for the Treasurer role, not Town Clerk and general office staff.

David asks if anyone has talked to Darlene about filling in for Town Clerk responsibilities. Hannah says she is not interested.

Sandi thinks the special town meeting is a good idea and will help in the future when either of the roles need to be filled. She says there is someone she knows from out of town who has been a town clerk who would be interested in filling in for a while. Hannah says that Assistant Clerk doesn't need to be a town resident, so it might be possible to appoint an Assistant Clerk who does the bulk of the Clerk work.

Denise is in favor of holding a special town meeting.

Sherry asks about job descriptions. Hannah says the Clerk and Treasurer jobs are in statute, but the admin work would be extra.

Sandi will contact Katie Buckley from VLCT for the wording of an article. The board will aim for Thursday, May 22nd for a special town meeting. There will need to be a special selectboard meeting to approve the warning.

Executive Session

Krista makes a motion at 8:17 to go into Executive Session to engage in confidential attorney-client communications for the purpose of receiving professional legal services to the selectboard. David seconds.

Janet recuses herself from the executive session.

Put to a vote: all five in favor.

Out of executive session at 9:49. No votes were taken.

Policy Review

Krista says there are two things she recommends be removed from the current personnel policy:

- Section 31 – Severability – suggests that there is an employment contract which there isn't.
- Section 4 – Probationary period – Krista says that *at-will* employees can be fired at any time for any reason. Probationary periods suggest that something changes after the probationary period that gives employees a right to employment.

Krista says that employees have the right to be told why they are being terminated and have the right to a hearing where they can challenge the reason. This should be true whether an employee is fired at 3 months or 9 months. David asks if with the probationary period, an employee can be fired without a reason. Krista says she checked with counsel and her understanding is that it is a matter of best practice to give an employee a reason and a hearing regardless of the duration of their employment.

The board will review changes and vote on the personnel policy at the next meeting. All that would change is removing sections 4 and 31 from the policy on the town website.

David asks about a policy for reimbursing mileage. Krista will work on this also.

Warrants and Mail

Mail is opened and warrants signed.

Further Business

*Krista makes a motion to adjourn. Denise Seconds. All in favor.
Adjourned at 9:58*

Respectfully submitted,
Hannah Regier, Town Clerk

Letter from Cheryl Charles / <https://vtruralschools.org/>

Dear School Board and Select Board Members,

Rural Community Public Schools are under pressure. Rising property taxes are a pressing concern for Vermonters, and legislators have pledged to address this problem in the upcoming session. While we wholeheartedly agree that property taxes must remain manageable for hardworking Vermonters, closing rural community public schools is not the solution. Rural Schools are a precious asset, and their closure should be an act of last resort. School closures will have dire consequences for children and their communities and will fail to reduce property taxes. State-mandated consolidation efforts have failed to reduce costs; instead, costs have continued to rise. One size fits all solutions do not work in our diverse system.

To ensure our voices are heard in the State House, we must stand together. The **Rural School Community Alliance** is a coalition of Vermont's rural community public schools and districts committed to advocating for the value and importance of community public schools for our children and for a democratic voice in decision making about their future.

The Vermont legislature is considering substantial policy changes, including potential “enrollment thresholds” for schools and the closure of those below the thresholds. The Rural School Community Alliance will advocate against such measures, emphasizing the indispensable role rural schools play in the lives of Vermont’s children, families, and communities. Our goal is to encourage legislators to pursue meaningful property tax reform that strengthens Vermont’s future, not quick fixes that would dismantle rural communities and harm children.

Joining the Alliance is free and straightforward. If your school board or selectboard wishes to become a member, please email us at vtschoolsrock@gmail.com with the name of a lead contact and their email address. Your contact will be added to a Google group for communication purposes. You can learn more at the website: www.vtruralschools.org

The Alliance currently is supported by more than 80 towns across the state. Since January 15th, organizations that have joined RSCA through a vote of their Board include school districts, supervisory unions, union districts, select boards, and several early-childhood and parent-teacher groups. New members are joining every week, and we are fielding inquiries daily: organizations in an additional 30 towns are exploring membership.

As school board members, select board members, parents, grandparents, and community members, we understand the profound value of community public schools of all sizes. They are the beating heart of our communities. The Rural Community Schools Alliance is committed to advocating for their ability to thrive and prosper into the future. We invite you to join us in this important work.

Sincerely,

Rural School Community Alliance