

Athens Selectboard Meeting Minutes
September 19, 2024
7:00pm at the Athens Town Office

In attendance: David Bemis, Sandi Capponcelli, Janet Perry, Krista Gay, Denise Randall, Hannah Regier, April Lyman, Don Capponcelli, Andy Toepfer, Linda Taylor

Called to order at 7:02

Adjustments to Agenda

Krista says that VLCT hasn't come back with a definitive answer yet about the question she had regarding doctor's notes and the sick/safe leave policy. The policy review can't move forward at this time.

David makes a motion to postpone the policy review until the October meeting. Sandi seconds. Put to a vote: all in favor.

Minutes of Prior Meeting

Denise makes a motion to accept the minutes from both the regular and special meetings. Sandi seconds. Put to a vote: all in favor.

Public Comments

Don thanks the road crew for the ditching on Reed Road.

Linda Taylor said that when the catch basin was put in, Matt said he would come back and put in a riser. She says she has a deep canyon – 53" deep at its deepest – which is worrisome. She'd like the riser put in as soon as possible. The board wasn't aware that a riser was needed. Linda said she was surprised that it was Ivor doing the work when the selectboard had voted to have the town do the work. David and Sandi explain that the state agreed to include the Mill Hill work in the town's Grants in Aid with the rest of this year's stormwater work. The grant should cover Ivor's time. Denise asks if Matt has that in writing. Sandi says it was a phone conversation, but it shouldn't be an issue. David says he will reach out to Matt about the riser. Denise said she went up to look at it and thought it wasn't put where it was supposed to be. Linda says the catch basin sets in quite a ways from the town ditch. She says it doesn't affect their mill stones in this location but might not catch the water as well. Krista asks if someone can send a follow up email to the state about the scope of the Grants in Aid change. Krista wants to make sure the town is covered. Sandi suggests for her to follow up with Matt.

The board looks at photos that Denise has of the catch basin installed. Sandi says a slightly different style grate was put in because the beehive wasn't available.

Denise says that David was misquoted in the Athenian about the guardrails influencing visibility at the intersection of Brookline Rd. And Route 35. David meant that he was concerned about guardrails on 35, above the intersection, not in front of the Randall's house.

Boards and Officials / Treasurer Report

Hannah says that taxes are collected. There is about \$80,000 delinquent. A few late homesteads are still coming in from the state and some refunds are going out with the warrant. All of the voted appropriations are in the warrant and all of the internal fund transfers have been made and are reflected in the balance sheet. The school taxes are also being paid this month.

MERP Implementation Grant: Hannah and Don have been working on a budget and Hannah and Janet both attended a webinar last Friday. The deadline has been extended a week, and eligibility has been opened up to more towns, which will make it more competitive. Hannah reviews the budget, which includes figures for the town garage: a new roof, HVAC, insulation, etc. The total ask is ~\$425k for the garage work. It includes 20% for ADA upgrades and 20% for oversight, permitting, engineering, and other support services.

Denise asks if this money is awarded, if the town would have other money to put towards the Community Center. Hannah thinks the town would still be using the ~\$130k from the ARPA funds towards the garage for non-energy-related items. There is \$75,000 in the MERP request for the Community Center, with the argument that it will help the town to have leverage for other grant applications.

Denise asks if Hannah thinks the application is strong as it or if it needs more work. Hannah is going to run it by Mike McConnell. She says that no one really knows what the other projects are going to be around the state, so it's hard to know how this project will compare. There is a scoring system that the town already scores pretty high on because of energy burden.

David asks about the ADA component. Hannah says that BGS requires a building to be ADA compliant in order to get the grant funds. If a building isn't already ADA compliant, 20% of the grant request can be used to bring the building into compliance.

Don says that he, Matt and Brian Herson have spent a lot of time figuring out the HVAC system that was quoted. Don describes the radiant tube heaters that he likes in the CVS warehouse that were quoted for this project. Don considers some of the tradeoffs of systems and fuel types. Hannah says that for this application, the final system doesn't need to be completely set. There is going to be a process for adjusting scope once the grants are awarded.

Krista asks about the service contract in the HB quote. Hannah clarifies that the town isn't signing anything with HB right now with regard to the HVAC quote.

Denise makes a motion to use the information in the draft MERP application. Seconded by Sandi. Put to a vote: all in favor.

Don / Cemetery Commission: The commission reviewed a design Don proposed for steel gates at the Valley Cemetery. He thinks it will cost \$3000 in materials and hardware, along with volunteer labor and tools. He might get posts in the ground this fall, but the rest will be done next year. He will come up with better numbers to use in the 2025 budget.

David says Ben Picz was looking for some gravel on his road. Sandi says Matt thought it would be two loads. Matt may have told Ben the gravel wasn't in the budget. The board thinks if the road needs gravel, it should be done. There isn't a lot of gravel stockpiled now.

David makes a motion to speak to Matt to instruct him to put gravel on Whitney Rd. as needed. Krista seconds. Put to a vote: all in favor.

Krista says there are 15 entrants for the chili cookoff next weekend.

The quilt show at the Meetinghouse went very well with over 50 attendees and raised over \$400 for the Meetinghouse.

Schools: Mark Berman is a new schoolboard member. There are 33 kids, split evenly between Athens and Grafton. She says there will be a vote soon about closing Townshend and Jamaica and sending those kids to Newfane. Krista explains that the state has a penalty if schools spend more than a set amount per pupil, and smaller schools do spend more per pupil. The penalties were suspended during Covid but will be reinstated soon. The penalty is a driver of financial decisions in smaller schools. With all the closings of small schools, Krista thinks the discussion will come to Athens/Grafton soon. She also points to all the short-term rentals in downtown Grafton, so new families can't move in and there aren't many new students from Grafton. The board discusses the difficulties of the long-distance travel created when small schools close. Any vote on school closing would begin with a recommendation from the schoolboard, then would come to the taxpayers for a vote. Heather Chase, the state rep, who said the state has been doing a study about the long-term financial benefits of consolidating schools. Krista says that the Athens-Grafton school is doing great financially. One of the problems is the number of homeschool students – 12 pupils. Home schooled kids who come and use the school facilities don't count in the headcount for per-pupil cost. Another issue is that there were low birthrates before the pandemic and there are two very small classes.

Krista shares a bit more on towns that have passed short-term rental ordinances.

Don says that next week at 2:00 on the 27th, Jon Saccoccio, the architect, is coming to the Meetinghouse to look at the ramp possibilities.

Janet says that the Planning Commission met but postponed the meeting twice to accommodate Mike McConnell's schedule. Now it is set for October 1st.

Bull Creek Common Lands

Andy Toepfer says the nonprofit land trust that created the Community Forest has a second project. It is north of Sam Farr Rd., from where the gate is, all the way to the Townshend line and includes another parcel in Townshend. The total size is 340 acres. Andy says that Bull

Creek Common Lands is a community-based organization and wants the properties to be a community resource. He thinks the new project area will remain more primitive, without trails, except for possibly one small section that might connect the Sam Farr trail to Billy Smith Rd. in Townshend, going around the swamp that blocks Sam Farr Rd. He asks the selectboard if they could sign a letter of support to submit with grant applications. He says that they are also going to Townshend next week to ask for a letter of support.

Krista asks if the land is currently unoccupied. It is. She asks if there is any possibility for pushback around the land being better used to develop housing. Andy doesn't think so because the land is so remote and hard to access. There is not power, phone, internet, etc. Andy says the organization is also watershed and water quality focused. Developing that land would impact the quality of Bull Creek and the volume of runoff that comes down and causes flooding. Sandi asks about the landowner up off of Billy Smith Rd. Andy says that Mark is supportive of this project.

David makes a motion to sign the letter and show their support for the Bull Creek Common Lands project. Denise seconds. Put to a vote: all in favor.

FEMA Grant Agreement

Hannah says there is a subgrant agreement from the state who will be dispersing the FEMA funds for the 2023 flooding when the funds become available. The disaster funds for Reed Rd. are frozen now because the federal government is out of FEMA money. There are mitigation funds available, but what is being offered is for a project on Ober Hill that the town already declined because it would be in conflict with the scoping study that's being done. Somehow the "no" wasn't communicated up to FEMA and the state, so the town still received a grant. Hannah thinks that the selectboard just shouldn't sign the reimbursement request for the Ober Hill funds. Amber has been leading the FEMA work and has had several different contacts at FEMA. She will try to reach out to her current contact to see if there's anything else the town needs to do.

Sandi makes a motion to sign the subgrant agreement. Denise seconds.

Discussion: Krista asks why child support is mentioned in the grant agreement. David thinks it's because FEMA grants also go to individuals and that is just the boilerplate. Krista says that in order to comply with the grant agreement, the town needs to make sure their employment policies meet FEPA.

Put to a vote: all in favor.

Warrants and Mail

Mail is opened and warrants signed.

There is a salt quote from Cargill for \$86.75/ton. Signing the quote is not a commitment to buy salt from them but allows the town to buy from them if needed.

Sandi makes a motion to sign the quote. Janet seconds. Put to a vote: all in favor.

The board discusses the hours the road crew are working. It looks like they are working 7-hour days. Krista says it doesn't look good if they are saying they are too busy to do the Meetinghouse tree work. The board discusses how comp time works.

Krista asked what happened with the truck labeling. Matt has tried calling Vermont Ts and can't get through to them. Hannah tried calling once and also didn't get through. Denise suggests the road crew can drive up there and stop in. Krista says the town should get what they paid for. The truck needs to be cleaned and prepped before putting the signs on. Krista says she will call Vermont Ts and tell them to call the town garage. Tom Taylor paid for the truck signage over a year ago and the town reimbursed him. Hannah remembers \$300 being the price.

Sandi makes a motion to sign the letter of intent to participate in the SFY25 Municipal Roads Better Roads Category A Grant – Road Erosion Inventory. Denise seconds. Put to a vote: all in favor.

Krista reads information on the new state ethics code that will go into effect January 1, 2025. David suggests that it be added to the agenda for the next meeting.

Krista leads a discussion on short term rental regulation and how landowners can't sue about it because they are not a protected class.

Further Business

Denise says she understands that the grant paid for Ivor to do the work on Mill Hill, but it was a direct request from the selectboard to have Matt do the work. Sandi said that Matt and Duane worked with Ivor's crew. A small excavator was used.

Denise says that if the guys are working 7-hour days and taking comp time, they really should be doing the trees at the Meetinghouse. David says that they can't prevent the highway crew from taking comp time. Denise understands Sherry's point of view that it's an embarrassment to the town that the tree work hasn't been done.

Krista asks if comp time is paid out at time and a half. It is banked and used as time off OR paid out at time and a half. The board discusses again how comp time is calculated and used.

Hannah says it does encourage the guys to work fewer hours in the summer because they have so much comp time they can use as time off. Krista says she takes Matt at his word that he's busy prepping for winter now and doesn't have time to do the tree work at the Meetinghouse.

It's visually hard for her to see them taking time off. Sandi says there are other reasons behind the guys not wanting to do the Meetinghouse work, i.e. the time it takes to burn the wood.

Janet says that four years ago the guys went up to do the work and Sherry didn't want them to because she didn't want it burned. Janet says that Matt suggested a different method that Sherry didn't like either. Krista points out that Sherry isn't in control of the method used. April suggests bringing the brush down to the brush pile at the town garage.

Krista says there were almost two accidents that she witnessed at the quilt show because of the poor visibility at the corner of Meetinghouse Rd. Cars can't see the building until they are past the road, then back up on Route 35 so they can make the turn.

Janet says that a while back the Meetinghouse had talked about getting a historical sign for the side of the road before the corner so people would know to slow down.

Sandi makes a motion to adjourn. All in favor.

Adjourned at 8:33

Respectfully submitted,
Hannah Regier, Town Clerk