**Town Meeting informational meeting - March 6, 2023**

Meeting was called to order at 7:15pm due to technical difficulties.

Merrily Lovell, Selectboard Chair, gave a welcome and an introduction to the format of this evening's meeting.

Frank Twarog, Moderator, provided information about the use of microphones to ensure that those on Zoom could hear the proceedings.

Before presenting the Town budget articles, Merrily Lovell gave a brief presentation honoring Missy Ross, outgoing Town Clerk & Treasurer. Missy said a few words of thanks and received a standing ovation.

Article I – To hear the reports of the officers of the Town of Hinesburg

Merrily Lovell presented a recap of the prior year in Hinesburg. In particular, she highlighted:

* The hiring of CGR to conduct a public safety survey in response to the failure of the police budget last year and questions about the viability of ambulance service in Hinesburg
* The formation of the Diversity, Equity, Inclusiveness & Belonging Committee
* The exploration of facilities improvements including Town Hall, the expansion of the Fire Department building and Lot 1 designs
* Land conservation including the addition of 291 acres of Carse land to the Town Forest and the conservation of the Ballard Farm
* Solar added to the Town Garage and Police Station; participation in group net metering; talking with Acorn Solar about installing trackers at the old landfill
* Support of affordable housing through a $50,000 pass-thru grant for the expansion of Kelley's Field
* The loss of two long-time community members: Karla Munson & Brian Busier
* Improved communication with residents through online surveys, Selectboard meet & greets, meetings with town committees and public meetings about the budget
* The tax rate for FY23 is expected to increase 5% due to decreased use of the fund balance and the loss of anticipated revenue from the ambulance service and COPS grant
* The retirement of Bill Lippert as our legislator after 28 years and Colleen MacKinnon from the CVSD Board which she has served since 1995; Bill was replaced by Phil Pouech at the November election
* Town employee introductions

Town Manager, Todd Odit, presented the FY23 proposed budget. The largest increases result from the planned change from a Director of Buildings & Facilities to a Director of Public Works, an increase of $25,000 to on-call Fire/Rescue/EMS pay rather than hiring more F/T employees, landfill monitoring and remediation (budgeted $10,000 but will likely cost more), and the increased cost of fireworks in the Recreation Department budget.

Non-tax revenue is down so the tax rate is increasing 3.6%. A 4th Highway Department position is not included in the budget for the time being but if a qualified candidate was identified, the Town would still pursue hiring for the position in order to better staff the department.

The Town could explore a local option tax but that would require the Town to present a Town Charter to the legislature for approval so that would be a ways off.

Article II – Any other business thought proper

Phil Pouech announced that he has been in the legislature for about a month and it is his goal to respond to all constituent concerns in a timely manner. Phil honored Bill Lippert for his work to make Vermont fair, equal and safe for everyone. He highlighted Bill’s time chairing the House Judiciary Committee for 10 years, his service on the House Healthcare Committee, and his work to champion LGBTQ issues nationally.

Frank Twarog, Moderator, read the Town Meeting warning and commenced discussion of the voted articles.

Article III – To elect the necessary Town and School District officers by Australian ballot

No discussion.

Article IV - Shall the Town approve a General Government budget of $1,779,587 with the sum of $1,273,513 raised through taxes?

Val Spadaccini questioned the increase in delinquent taxes YoY. Missy Ross, delinquent tax collector, clarified that the data does not give a true picture and that delinquent amounts have not increased significantly. In addition, the Town was not able to initiate tax sales during the COVID19 pandemic.

George Dameron asked about the wastewater treatment upgrade. What is the strategy to mitigate the financial impact on users of the system? Merrily Lovell indicated we will be pursuing more grants to fund this project. Phil Pouech responded that this was not a choice but was mandated by the State. We have a good plan in place but costs look to be increasing by 30-40% since the initial estimate. The costs are not finalized as we are going out to bid now for the construction phase. Loans are likely to be paid back starting in 2026 so there may be more users on the system at that time to help shoulder the costs.

Keith Roberts questioned whether we could impose impact fees on development. Todd Odit indicated that the Town is updating the Fire impact fee schedule to support a possible new fire station; we don't have highway or recreation impact fees like some other towns so we would be starting from scratch on those; impact fees cannot be imposed until it is demonstrated that there is an impact from the development.

Jennifer Decker raised the issue of PFAS in water within the Town. She urged those who might be affected by runoff from the old landfill to contact the Town. She suggested that the new wastewater treatment facility does not have the ability to remediate PFAS and wondered if the Town could advocate with the VT Dept of Environmental Conservation or use ARPA funds to address.

Val Spadaccini questioned the budget for HCRC. Mike Loner clarified that this is just the funding coming from the Town, not their entire budget.

Article V - Shall the Town approve a Highway Department budget of $720,583 with the sum of $542,083 raised through taxes?

Andrea Morgante thanked the Highway Department for their work but questioned policy decisions regarding clear roads. Road salt is showing up more in water samples so it is an environmental issue as well as a budget issue. She noted that our gravel pit is not able to supply gravel/sand for road maintenance so we will need to buy it elsewhere. Phil Pouech says we are already buying gravel so that cost is included in the budget presented.

Lee Bast asked if there are more environmentally-friendly alternatives to salt? Phil Pouech responded that he is on the Transportation Committee in the legislature and is not aware of any other affordable options currently available.

Article VI - Shall the Town approve the Hinesburg Community Police Department budget of $808,074 with the sum of $770,574 raised through taxes?

Val Spadaccini questioned why salaries have decreased. Are more officers resulting in less overtime? Todd Odit indicated that we are staffing fewer hours as we are not covering at night. Anthony Cambridge, Chief, clarified that we have never had much of an overtime budget through shift adjustments.

Paul Lamberson asked how we are handling the overnight hours and why we lost the COPS grant. Merrily Lovell explained that we were no longer eligible for the COPS grant funding as it was specifically intended to hire a sixth full-time officer which we do not have and do not currently anticipate hiring. Anthony Cambridge gave an overview of the current staffing in the Police Department. We have no administrative assistant and no data/IT support. The department is staffed from 7am-11pm during the week. Anthony answers calls from dispatch during the overnight hours and after 3pm on Saturday. Even with a 5th officer, there will still be gaps in the schedule and there is not budget support to fill those gaps.

Ken Brown asked for clarification on the process if we were to call 911 at night.

Carl Bohlen commended the creation of the DEIB Committee. How would the community engage with CGR to discuss needs/metrics around public safety? Merrily Lovell suggested that folks contact Todd or Joy in the Town Manager’s office for information about drop-in hours with CGR during their current visit. They will also be returning for another visit in April. Merrily also clarified that the data showing that we have 6 FTE in the Police Department does not mean that we have 6 full-time officers as some of that reflects part-time employees.

Jennifer Decker offered a reminder that CGR is also assessing the needs for ambulance service in Hinesburg. With regard to police funding, Jennifer feels that we could have a separate unarmed department that could respond to non-violent acts and be supported by a different revenue stream. Merrily Lovell stated that issues of police overreach have not been evident in Hinesburg.

Rob Bast gave some history of the formation of the Community Police Department in the 1990s, focused locally and trusted locally. The department started with one officer and has grown under the same community-focused framework.

Roger Kohn asked where we stand with regionalization efforts regarding public safety. Merrily Lovell explained that we had meetings with Richmond but found that there would be challenges due to our differing approaches. The efforts were put on hold awaiting the results of the CGR public safety study. Phil Pouech added that Richmond was the only neighboring town that showed interest in talking at that time but it is something we will continue to explore because it could offer better services (e.g. more coverage).

Steve Aliberti indicated we needed more data about the police department schedule and what exactly they do in order to make good budget decisions. Anthony Cambridge promised a “no compromise” level of service meaning that, if there is someone staffing the department, they will respond to lock-outs, fingerprint requests, etc.

Lee Bast suggested that the Police Department is like air; its value is only appreciated in its absence.

Article VII - Shall the Town approve the Hinesburg Fire Department budget of $623,548 with the sum of $555,548 raised through taxes?

George Dameron commended the Fire Department and Police Department for their assistance during a recent incident on his icy driveway.

Article VIII - Shall the Town approve the Carpenter-Carse Library allocation of $244,000 with the sum of $244,000 raised through taxes?

Bill Lippert praised the library for the excellent services provided to adults and children in the community.

Article IX - Shall the Town approve Capital Transfers of $582,867 with the sum of $482,867 raised through taxes?

Paul Lamberson asked for clarification on the $100,000 discrepancy between the total budget amount and the amount to be raised through taxes. Todd Odit indicated that the $100,000 is money that we already have on hand. Phil Pouech added that the capital budget exists to have money on hand for upcoming expenses.

Article X - Shall the Town appropriate the sum of $40,050 with the sum of $40,050 raised through taxes, to be distributed as specifically designated below?

Lee Bast asked for confirmation that the list of agencies receiving funding had been deemed to be serving Hinesburg. Phil Pouech explained that there is an Agency Review Committee who vets those who apply for funding to ensure that the organizations are those that most benefit Hinesburg.

Val Spadaccini questioned the discrepancy between the article and the spreadsheet presented on page 23 of the Annual Report. Phil Pouech indicated that the spreadsheet Val referred to did not include HCRC.

Article XI - Shall voters authorize the payment of real and personal property taxes for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2024, payable in full to the Town of Hinesburg in one (1) installment, with the due date being November 15, 2023 and to be collected by the Town Treasurer? Any and all payments received in the Town Treasurer's Office later than midnight on November 15, 2023 will be considered delinquent and will be subject to the collection of interest at the rate of 1% per month or fraction thereof for the first three (3) months and thereafter at the rate of 1.5% per month or fraction thereof.

No discussion

Article XII - Shall the voters authorize the purchase of a Pumper/Tanker for the Fire Department in an amount not to exceed $850,000 to be financed over a period not to exceed ten (10) years?

Paul Lamberson asked why we are considering this question now and what happens if we do not approve it. Merrily Lovell stated that this expense has been budgeted but is over the threshold that requires voter approval. Nick Baker, Fire Chief, explained that this is part of a planned replacement schedule and is combining a pumper and tanker to minimize the impact to taxpayers. With regards to timing, there is a 2-3 year build time before delivery so we needed to get taxpayer approval now for a truck that will be delivered to us when we need it.

Article XIII - Shall the town provide notice of the availability of the annual report by posting notice on the town website and in three public places in town at least 30 days before the annual meeting instead of mailing or otherwise distributing the report to the voters of the town pursuant to 24 V.S.A. § 1682(a)?

Andrea Morgante spoke in opposition to the article to require residents to request a copy of the Annual Report rather than having it mailed to all residents automatically. She also supports the continued breakout of the different department budgets into separate articles for budget transparency.

Article XIV & Article XV - Shall the voters authorize the Selectboard to appoint a town treasurer as provided in 17 V.S.A. § 2651f? AND Shall the voters authorize the Selectboard to appoint a town clerk as provided in 17 V.S.A. § 2651e?

Rob Bast suggested that electing people locally has value for democracy. There are over 4,000 residents of Hinesburg so we have capable people to fill these roles.

Lenore Budd expressed concern that someone could run for these positions in the future who is not qualified.

Andrea Morgante spoke in favor or keeping the positions of Town Clerk and Town Treasurer elected. It is the responsibility of the voters to vet candidates and encourage good people to run.

Ken Brown made the point that we can tolerate a bad Selectboard member because they are just one of five members of the board. However, electing a bad Town Clerk or Town Treasurer could result in a big mess.

Bill Lippert stated that the Clerk is the face of the Town to the community and he believes that the community should have the ability to vet candidates and choose the person for this role. He recognizes the good intention of the articles but does not support them.

Sam Hemingway inquired where the push to put these articles on the ballot came from. Maggie Gordon suggested that this was an effort to plan ahead for a scenario where an unqualified person runs for either of these positions or no one runs.

Merrily Lovell stated her personal desire to have the positions remain elected.

Phil Pouech indicated that the Selectboard felt there were good reasons on both sides of the issue and that it was best to put the question to the voters to decide.

Mike Loner indicated that he agrees with Bill Lippert’s comments regarding having the community choose but, as a former CEO, is concerned about the potential lack of succession planning.

Dennis Place wants to see the positions remain elected and has seen no problems with the current framework.

Claire Weis suggested that we have a deep pool of folks in Hinesburg who could serve in these roles so she would prefer to see them continue to be elected. She asked if there are qualifications that we can set.

Pat Mainer asked for input from Missy Ross, current Town Clerk & Town Treasurer and Heather Roberts, current Assistant Town Clerk/Treasurer now running for the positions of Town Clerk & Town Treasurer. Missy suggested that it would be a loss for Hinesburg to have the positions be appointed. There is a long tradition in Vermont of the Town Clerk, in particular, being chosen by the people and she would like to see that continue.

John Lyman asked again whether the Town can set qualifications for these positions. Merrily Lovell clarified that the qualifications are only those required to run for any other elected office in Hinesburg. If the Selectboard felt the person elected to fill the role lacked experience, they would suggest specific trainings through VLCT.

Steve Aliberti made the point that the voters have plenty of opportunity to vet candidates for elected position and reminded those in attendance that the same minimum of qualifications applies to the Selectboard.

Lee Bast expressed his gratitude for the deep and thoughtful discussion.

Missy Ross added that there is a CPA who comes in to reconcile the Town financials monthly and prepare for our annual audit. This provides oversight of the day-to-day process of the Treasurer.

Bill Lippert cautioned the Selectboard about putting articles on the ballot that they are not solidly behind. The tenor of the room indicates lack of support for these articles but there are many voters who will not have heard this discussion and many who have already voted.

Paul Lamberson drew a parallel to the prior vote about providing ambulance service. The voters voted in favor of providing ambulance service but the Selectboard has not moved forward as a result of additional information about state licensing requirements.

Other business

Mike Loner indicated that the DEIB Committee will be focusing on Town policy, removing restrictions and barriers to make Hinesburg more welcoming. They will also be serving as an advisory board to other Town committees.

Phil Pouech moved to adjourn. Maggie Gordon seconded. Meeting adjourned at 10:10pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Melissa B. Ross, Town Clerk

Heather J Roberts, Assistant Town Clerk