

STOCKBRIDGE SELECT BOARD MEETING MINUTES
Thursday, April 8, 2021
6:30 p.m.
ZOOM MEETING - TOWN OFFICES, 50 MAIN STREET

Present: Roxanne McCaffrey, Patrick White and Mike Canales

Call to Order:

Roxanne called the meeting to order.

Roxanne made a motion to accept the Select Board meeting minutes for March 18, 2021. Patrick seconded; both were in favor.

Roxanne next reviewed the Wildlife Feeding Ordinance (bear bylaw). She said that the intent of this ordinance by Chief Fennelly is to protect the health and welfare of both people and wildlife by prohibiting the feeding or attracting of wildlife. Roxanne said that there are problems with people feeding the bears. Patrick commented that as down town borders numerous acres of preserve, everyone has to understand that there will be more bears. Stating that birdfeeders do not have a carve out in the bylaw and are therefore banned year-round, Patrick questioned why are we regulating residents. He also felt that our Animal Control Officer, John Drake, should be allowed to weigh in as he has not seen it yet. Roxanne noted that this is a proposed bylaw and voters will determine if it passes. Patrick felt that the bylaw was a mistake by creating an either-or option for voters if it does not meet a need. He suggested removing section B altogether and calling it a bear bylaw instead of wildlife. It was agreed to continue and discuss at a meeting when Chuck and Darrell are available and to get a copy to the John Drake; continued to April 15th at 9:00 a.m.

Next Mike informed the Board that Ray Ellsworth the Town Accountant has decided to retire effective May 1st. Mike said that Ray has been outstanding and that he has agreed to stay on longer to perform the essential duties as we search for his replacement. Mike said that we will get the advertisement out, form a search committee (tentatively: Jay Bikofsky, Jorja Marsden, Bronly Boyd and Erica Olsen) to review candidates and bring at least two candidates forward to the Select Board for interviews. The appointments to the search committee will be made at the next meeting. Roxanne suggested two additional potential appointees for the Accountant search committee who were on the search committee previously bringing Ray Ellsworth forward; David McCarthy and Christine Rasmussen. Patrick suggested advertising on Indeed as well. The appointments are scheduled for the April 15, 2021 Select Board meeting.

Patrick next spoke on residential exemption. Beginning with the minuses: he said it shifts the tax burden from a class of people to a different class, it is more complicated for Town Hall to deal with, and there are only a few different types of exemptions. Patrick said that he felt that Stockbridge is in a transition; a different Town now than it was 30 or 40 years ago. Stating that many elderly residents and those of modest means may not be able to keep up with the increasing property assessments and taxes; he feels the need to support these most vulnerable people in Town. Roxanne said that the devil is in the details, that there are many details to be discussed if this was to be pursued, one of them being the percentage. She would like to hear a lot more from the public. Jay Bikofsky stated that there are no communities in Berkshire County who have residential exemptions and we first need to get all the details and explore all the options. Steve Shatz said that it is difficult to be perceived to be against the concerns that the Select Board has raised, but that we need to be very careful about instituting a program like this without having looked at some empirical data from the fourteen Massachusetts communities (out of 351) that have adopted the program; data on what kind of benefit this has been to the population it was designed to provide assistance to. He continued that under Chapter 59 we do have a tax deferral program that could be instituted. We also have an abatement program and it would be interesting to see how many have availed themselves of the abatement. Steve said that we need to look at the tools available, the number of people who will be benefitted by it and what impact there will be on a non-voting resident population who is already providing 60 to 70 percent of our residential levy. Steve pointed out that the Select Board has the power to do this without a town meeting. Steve also mentioned that in 1979 when this was approved no one could provide data to prove its effectiveness and that “to this day” you cannot get this kind of information from the Division of Local Services (DLS). Kate Fletcher suggested a zoom presentation on the topic. Patrick agreed with doing an educational effort informing people before asking to make a decision. Jim Balfanz said there are several programs available for local tax deferrals and thinks this should not be rushed into; he agrees with Kate to have a hearing to have them weigh in. Patrick said “we are talking about that for next year”. Roxanne added that “we have not had that discussion as a board”. Jim Balfanz stressed the need to have a public hearing about tax abatement. Patrick pointed out that not many people participate in the ZOOM meetings and that is his rationale for putting tax abatement on the warrant. Jim Balfanz responded that although many town residents who cannot participate at the time of the live meetings, they view the meetings on TV or online at a later time. Patrick interjected “They can watch the meetings after the fact?” Roxanne responded yes and added that the

town receives some emails, they are not flooded with comments about specific topics “which is too bad”. She wishes more people would respond after the fact when they do see the meeting”. Regarding tax abatement opportunities, Kate Fetcher mentioned she supported Patrick’s comment that people are hesitant to share their confidential information, “that nothing in Stockbridge is confidential”. Roxanne responded that regarding the tax abatement, “everyone does not know everything” and even though the Select Board knows 8 people applied, “we have no idea who those 8 people are”, even as Selectmen, being in the town offices often.

Michael led the discussion and next steps on the options on streetlights in Town; from going to LEDs, owning the lights ourselves and what the best fit for the Town would be. Mike said that Laura Dubester and the committee have been very impressive with all of the work they have done to date. At this point the committee needs to bring this forward to the Select Board. The committee would like to bring in a consultant to do the lighting inventory and determine the next stages of the plan. Mike explained that National Grid over the last couple of years has offered upgrades of moving lights to LED which would save approximately 30% (\$12,000). Looking into it, other communities are buying the street lights themselves (the light, cobra head and the arm) thereby the community taking over the street lights which can save up to 70 percent per year (\$28,000/annum). To go to the next step, a.) we need to petition National Grid for a cost to buy the lights and b.) bring in consultants for the Select Board to interview. After the inventory is complete the plan is to get a DOER grant to do the lighting conversion. Patrick asked about the asset loss; Michael responded that National grid would still own the poles – an insignificant loss of asset value. Laura Dubester stated that the committee looks forward to the saving; that by taking ownership of the lights, Stockbridge would:

- Get more attractive lights
- Get better and more night skies friendly lighting
- It will save much more money
- That small towns like Stockbridge can contract out for maintenance
- Laura also stated that the Committee feels more comfortable with this action as they have now explored it in depth and by waiting we would get half the savings vs. proceeding now.

The consultant interviews were the next item Michael mentioned.

Patrick asked should this be on the warrant; Michael responded that the SB already placed the monies for the consultant on the capital warrant.

Patrick felt that Mike and the committee could take lead on the interviews. Roxanne stated that the Street Lighting subcommittee has done an “amazing” amount of work, was impressed by her attendance at the most recent meeting, and had no reservations about the committee moving forward with interviews for consultants.

Roxanne made a motion that the Street Lighting sub-committee move forward with interviews of the lighting inventory consultants. Seconded, Roxanne-Aye, Patrick-Aye.

Roxanne agreed. Roxanne made a motion that they move forward with the Green Committee’s Street Lighting sub-committee to give the Select Board a recommendation on the lighting inventory consultant position. Patrick seconded; both were in favor.

Discussion of the light pole in front of St Paul’s Church ensued. Patrick pointed out that it is not green like the other poles in downtown. Kate Fletcher pointed out that the green light poles were an initiative by Mary Flynn (former Select Board member). Roxanne agreed it was “hideous” and asked if Michael Canales could request National Grid to paint the single steel colored pole in front of St Paul’s Church green. Patrick asked if the lights (LED) would be controller ready – Michael Canales, Roxanne and Laura Dubester responded yes.

Next was discussion on Tax Increment Financing and Vacant Storefront Initiative and Roxanne said that we need to start talking about this. She is concerned with our down town commercial area and that there are a lot of places for sale. She started looking at what incentive programs are out there that might be able to assist us in terms of revitalizing our commercial area; saving what we have and build upon it. One option is TIF (Tax Increment Financing) agreements that you can enter into to provide tax incentives to retain or attract businesses. There is also the Vacant Storefront Initiative. If the Town qualifies, it is a program where the Town identifies an area, typically a commercial area where you have vacant storefronts. There is also an application for businesses. She stated it appears that businesses within a vacant storefront district can also apply for tax credits.

Barb Zanetti (Stockbridge Chamber of Commerce) mentioned there is a “Shuttered Business Grant” program (Covid related) and asked if this has any relationship to that. Roxanne responded that, no, we can research that, but this initiative is part of the Massachusetts Economic Development Incentive Program.

Patrick brought up the latest Covid relief monies; Michael verified that this is \$500,000 and suggested we use it to benefit local Businesses, Barbara indicates she spoke with Michel Canales about promoting Stockbridge businesses via NPR, etc.

Roxanne suggested engaging in longer range thinking about economic development; doing a full economic development analysis of the town; with business and public input we come up with a longer range plan for revitalization and retention of businesses in Stockbridge and how to ensure that our Main Street is well maintained. Barb Zanetti agreed.

Kate Fletcher asked about the use of raised crosswalks in the proposed intersection redesign, Roxanne answered, yes, there is one incorporated; that another could be considered but involves added cost for drainage

The last item on the agenda was discussion on Agriculture & Forestry Commission. Patrick said that article 25 of the bylaws allows us to have one and felt its importance on both the forestry and agricultural side. There are three commissioners who can be appointed and two alternatives. Matt Boudreau has indicated an interest. Roxanne stated that if anyone is interested in serving on the Agriculture & Forestry Commission, contact the Selectmen and/or Michael Canales, Town Administrator.

Roxanne requested additional questions or comments from the public:

Hugh Page suggested that the hunting abstracts might be useful to look at regarding the wording of the Wildlife Feeding Ordinance.

Patrick said that David Resnick who owns a house on Sergeant Street is turning 100 on April 17th and his family has asked that we proclaim that day David Resnick Day. Patrick will forward the letter to the Board and further discuss at the next meeting.

Adjournment:

With no further business, Roxanne adjourned the meeting at 7:42 p.m.