

Town & School District Virtual Informational Meeting, March 1, 2021

A virtual informational meeting was held jointly by the Charleston Selectboard and Charleston School District on Monday March 1, 2021 via Zoom.

MINUTES

The meetings of the Selectboard and School Board were called to order at 6:02 by Town Moderator Jean Wilson, who welcomed and thanked attendees for helping to maintain an important town tradition. The Selectboard was represented by Selectpersons Peter Moskovites and Patrick Austin, with Town Clerk Teri Gray and Asst. Clerk Colleen Kellogg also attending. Charleston School District was represented by Directors Kristen Watson and Heather Wright, with Principal Christopher Lawson also attending.

A total of 26 meeting participants joined the meeting, with several of these representing multiple household or family members logged in together.

Ms. Wilson reviewed the purpose and procedure for the meeting. Being an informational meeting and not a town meeting, it would not follow Roberts Rules, there would be no voting or motions, and one need not be a registered voter to speak. Attendees were asked to follow along using the Warning on pages 12-13 of the town report and to keep discussion germane to the article considered. Each article would begin with a board member ready to say a few words and then be opened up to questions and comments. As the meeting was being recorded, speakers were asked to state their name and—if not a Charleston resident—their town.

The Town Clerk said that voting on the articles would take place by Australian ballot the following day at the Town Clerk's Office from 10am to 7pm, and reminded those who had already requested ballots to deliver them to the office before 7pm to be counted. She referred participants to the town website, charlestonvt.org, under Town Meeting & Voting, to view copies of the Town and School Reports, sample ballots, and where election night results would be posted.

Colleen Kellogg asked participants who would like to comment on a particular article to please raise their hand and wait to be called on by Selectboard. She reviewed the controls for raising a hand on computer and telephone, as well as how to unmute when called on.

Following the order of the ballot, the Moderator read School Article 5: **Shall the voters of the School District approve the school board to expend \$2,252,454.00 which is the amount the school board has determined to be necessary for the ensuing fiscal year? It is estimated that this proposed budget, if approved, will result in education spending of \$16,193.00 per equalized pupil. This projected spending per equalized pupil is 5.52% lower than spending in the current year.**

School Board Chair Kristen Watson said the proposed budget includes salary increases from the collective bargaining agreement occurring this year. Other changes include converting the part-time Math Intervention position to a full-time classroom teacher position to address increased enrollment. The budget also plans proactively for the future by beginning to fund replacement of student devices, one classroom set per year.

Due to a significant increase in enrollment over the past two years—to 130 students—the school needs additional physical space to meet student needs. Based on parent and community feedback, the board proposes the purchase of a modular space with financing up to \$240,000 over 10 years. If the town votes to move forward, the school will be looking at grants to help offset those costs.

Dan Whipple asked how well and septic system needs will be affected by the modular space and additional population. Ms. Watson said the \$240,000 figure includes site work related to the septic but did not have information about the well. Mr. Lawson said an impact study hadn't been conducted, and there are options about building placement. If the project moves forward, the school will work with an engineer to see what makes the most sense in terms of location and any facility modifications, and engineer costs are considered in the budget.

Peggy Stevens had read of a parent request to send seventh and eighth graders to the junior high and asked how that conversation factored in to a decision about the modular unit. Ms. Watson said there were preliminary meetings to gather feedback, and the school sent home a survey with various options to address space needs. The overwhelming opinion about what was best for students, in terms of social well-being and other factors, was to keep students local. The board also worked with the supervisory union to compare costs over ten years of 'tuitioning' students to the junior high versus the 10-year building financing. Both the financial perspective and community feedback pointed to keeping students in Charleston. Mr. Lawson said the meeting minutes and community survey results were posted on the school website.

Ms. Wilson read **School Article 6: Shall the voters of the School District authorize the Board of School Directors to make repairs and improvements to the Charleston Elementary School property in preparation for, and the purchase of, a two classroom modular building, in an amount not to exceed \$240,000.00, to be financed over a period of ten (10) years, subject to reduction by any available construction aid and grants received?**

Having spoken earlier to the need and support for the modular building, Ms. Wilson added that the building will allow for additional meeting spaces as well as much needed classroom space. Currently, meetings that need to occur at the school face space constraints.

Jim Barton said he was glad to hear that more kids will be going to Charleston Elementary. Mr. Austin concurred.

Mr. Moskovites asked if projected enrollment was expected to flatten, go up or down. Mr. Lawson said the smallest group is currently eighth grade, with 10 students. Other class sizes

range from 10-17, with most in the teens. There is no indication of a decrease, and he expects next year's enrollment to be higher by a few kids. As COVID settles off and more Pre-K students are enrolled, Pre-K numbers will provide a good indicator of future enrollment. Right now, the expectation is for enrollment to stay over 130, which is a record over the last ten years or so. Some students opted for remote learning or home-school due to COVID. If all students were in the building, the total student population would be 135.

Nancy Engels hopes that plans for the modular will attend to ventilation and other upgrade needs that have come up due to COVID. Ms. Watson said that the project budget is for a newly built modular structure and takes into account those factors. The school is also addressing those needs in the rest of the school building. Mr. Lawson said the school secured \$122,000 in grants to replace air exchange units across the school. Every classroom's air exchange unit and thermostat has been replaced, and the school is slowly moving away from pneumatic controls in place for 50 years.

With no other discussion of School District Articles, the Moderator adjourned the School District Meeting at 6:25 pm and began discussion of Town articles.

Ms. Wilson read **Town Article 3: Shall the voters authorize the Treasurer to collect current taxes with a final due date of Friday, October 22, 2021, with the policy of turning over to the delinquent tax collector taxes not physically received by the Treasurer in the Town Clerk's office by 5:00 pm on October 22, 2021, with postmarks not accepted as timely payment?**

Selectboard Chair Peter Moskovites said the article was a pro-forma annual question that must be voted on so the town can collect property taxes. There was no further discussion.

Ms. Wilson read **Town Article 4: Shall the voters authorize total fund expenditures of \$868,076.14 for Selectboard, highway, and cemetery operating expenses for the year beginning Jan. 1, 2021, of which \$648,895.01 shall be raised by taxes and \$219,181.13 by non-tax revenue?**

Mr. Moskovites said the expense budget is \$6,000 less than 2020 and will result in an estimated tax rate of .65, which is lower than .6729 in 2020. It's basically a flat budget with specific line items shown in the town report. Patrick Austin said he is confident that this level-funded budget is a good one.

Ms. Wilson read **Town Article 5: Shall the voters authorize the Selectboard to expend \$50,000 of the 2020 Highway Surplus of \$128,978.19 to repave and upgrade Center School Road?**

Mr. Moskovites addressed major factors contributing to the highway surplus. In revenue, the town received an additional \$28,000 if state highway aid due to COVID, as well as a \$20,000 Better Roads grant awarded after the budget vote. On the expenditure side, the town did not use \$32,000 of \$52,000 for crushing gravel because the crushing was stopped early, and also did not use \$20,000 of the diesel budget.

Dan Whipple asked if the pavement extended beyond the existing paved area. The bridge is a popular put-in for boaters, and parking sometimes complicates fire department access to the dry hydrant and even general travel on a sunny weekend day. Widening could be considered.

Mr. Moskovites said the board is considering extending the paved section—this will depend on how bids come in and what aid is available. The board will plan the project over the next months, will discuss it with VTrans, and will provide more information to the community. Mr. Austin said related repairs like culverts will affect how far the money goes, but he is hopeful the paving can extend to the bridge to complement everything the school has done to be inviting to the community. The town needs to get through paving the main part of the road before taking on an additional project, but he is open to addressing the parking area in some way that doesn't negatively affect the neighbors or the school.

Jim Barton expressed support for the need to repave the road. Nancy Engels said that outdoor recreation grants made available during COVID might help with a parking area and access for boaters.

Ms. Wilson read Town Article 6: Shall the voters authorize the Selectboard to transfer \$78,978.19 of the 2020 Highway Surplus of \$128,978.19 to the Road Equipment reserve fund?

Mr. Moskovites explained that the \$78,000 figure is what's left of highway surplus after taking away \$50,000 for the school road. The fund presently has \$65,000, and the additional money will be a good cushion for truck and equipment replacement.

Ms. Wilson read Town Article 7: Shall the voters appropriate the sum of \$50,000 to the Charleston Volunteer Fire Department and direct the Selectboard to assess a tax over and above the budget to meet the same?

CVFD Treasurer Blair Moulton said the department chose to level fund the budget during COVID. A \$50,000 appropriation served the department well last year, and with Morgan's appropriation, the department can operate a comfortable budget for the year. He announced most of the department has received the first COVID-19 shot, and about 95% will be completely vaccinated next week. Dan Whipple thanked residents and property owners for their generous support for the fall fundraiser—one of the reasons they were able to level fund. He emphasized that CVFD is much more than a fire department and capable on many fronts. They have a fully functional snowmobile rescue setup, which has been used twice this year to rescue a snowmobiler and a cross-country skier. One of the reasons they were able to get COVID shots is because the ambulance calls on CVFD for help almost every time the ambulance comes to town. The Ambulance services have scaled back their activities and don't send out many people. Mr. Austin thanked the department on behalf of the Selectboard.

Ms. Wilson read **Town Article 8: Shall the voters appropriate the sum of \$12,374.00 to the following organizations, which received appropriations of the same amount in 2020, and direct the Selectboard to assess a tax over and above the budget to meet the same? \$500 to Charleston Historical Society for support of the museum and collection; \$1,000 to Echo Lake Protective Association for milfoil prevention programs; \$800 to NorthWoods Stewardship Center for conservation and education services; \$1,100 to Dailey Memorial Library for services to residents; \$700 to Island Pond Library for services to residents; \$1,650 to Rural Community Transportation for transportation services to residents; \$500 to Orleans County Citizens Advocacy for mentoring individuals with developmental disabilities; \$600 to Northeast Kingdom Council on Aging for services to elder and disabled Vermonters; \$1,074 to Northeast Kingdom Human Services, Inc. for mental health, substance use, and intellectual disabilities services to residents; \$500 to Pope Memorial Frontier Animal Shelter for care of unwanted pets; \$3,000 to Orleans Essex VNA & Hospice for community nursing and health programs; \$50 to GreenUp Vermont for the statewide cleanup event and bags; \$100 to VT Rural Fire Protection Task Force for the Dry Hydrant Program; \$100 to Vermont Symphony Orchestra Symphony Kids for performances for local students; \$700 to Umbrella for domestic violence prevention and services to victims.**

Asst. Clerk Colleen Kellogg said that reports and information provided by these agencies can be reviewed on the town website. There was no further discussion.

With no further questions or comments, the Moderator adjourned the Selectboard meeting at 6:43. Mr. Austin recognized that the virtual format is not ideal for a town meeting, and board members thanked participants for joining.

DATED THIS 1ST DAY OF MARCH 2021

Approved this 11th day of March 2021 by the Charleston Selectboard:
