

**Mount Holly Special Select Board Meeting
January 7, 2020
Minutes**

Present: Select Board: Mark Turco (chair), Ron Tarbell, Jennifer Matthews

Town Officials: Susan Covalla, Carol Garrow-Woolley, David Johnson, Lori Norton, Clinton Woolley

Members of the Public: Morgan Collins, Peter Collins, Barbara Falco, Anthony Falco, Bret Harlow, Barbara Hazelton, Steve Hazelton, Craig Hutt Vater, Mike Martin, Gary Norton, Susan Poirier, Brenda Reed, Rouri Roytvayn, Vicki Seward, Mary Surething, Kelly Tarbell, Linda Tarbell, Ray Tarbell, Amy Turco, Dave Venter, Kristin Veysey, John Wood, Denise Young

1. **Call to Order** by Chair Mark Turco at 6:00 pm.

2. All stood for the **Pledge of Allegiance**.

3. **Changes and/or additions to the agenda** – Jennifer Matthews mentioned concerns about the wells in the area, in particular that of the town office and for the rescue squad and fire department, given the PFAS contamination found at the Mount Holly School. She stated she had heard from Richard Spiese from the VT Department of Environmental Conservation in response to her question about testing the wells. Mr. Spiese replied that one of the potentially responsible parties for the contamination, or the State, is responsible for the testing; we (theTown, rescue & fire) do not need to set-up the testing. Mr. Spiese said he would be in Mount Holly on January 13th to test the wells in the vicinity of the school.

4. **Mount Holly Volunteer Rescue Squad Budget Request** – Jennifer Matthews explained the reason this item was on the agenda was due to the receipt of a letter by the Mount Holly Select Board from Ludlow Municipal Manager Scott Murphy. Mr. Murphy wrote that the letter was necessary due to the large number of calls Ludlow Ambulance Service (LAS) was responding to in Mount Holly because Mount Holly Volunteer Rescue Squad (MHVRS) was not responding to the calls for EMS care. Attached to the letter was a proposed Ambulance Agreement contract between Ludlow Ambulance Service and the Town of Mount Holly for service by LAS in response to calls unanswered by MHVRS. The contract spells out that the Town of Mount Holly would be billed monthly for the LAS EMS service in the amount of \$500 per call for a primary ambulance to respond. Ms. Matthews spoke with Mr. Murphy and learned that LAS had responded to 19 calls in Mount Holly between January 1st and December 10th. If the contract had been in effect, this would translate into 19 calls at \$500 apiece for a total of \$9,500 on top of \$15,000 MHVRS receives from Mount Holly taxpayers. Ms. Matthews expressed her concern about the number of missed calls and the potential added expense for Mount Holly taxpayers.

John Wood introduced himself as a MHVRS member who lives in Shrewsbury. He stated MHVRS thought a letter between Select Boards was a bizarre way to address the situation of LAS responding to calls in Mount Holly. He explained that MHVRS is an all-volunteer squad with a 79% call response rate. He said in FY 18-19 the number of calls, usually during the day, responded to by LAS was nine according to MHVRS records, so there is a discrepancy in the numbers. He explained that MHVRS thought LAS was trying to generate income and was the only service double-dipping by billing the patient's insurance and the Town; Rutland Regional Ambulance Service, Wallingford and others do not do this. He also said the staffing challenges for volunteer organizations are statewide and nationwide with money not being the answer to address either coverage or staffing.

Ms. Matthews asked if MHVRS had talked or met with LAS. Mr. Wood said they had not as this was all so new. Mark Turco urged them to meet with LAS.

Bret Harlow stated that MHVRS pays Rutland Regional Ambulance Service a stipend to help cover calls. He thought this would have been a better course for LAS to follow. He continued that Ludlow was not in the same District, District 10, as Mount Holly and that they are under no obligation to respond to calls

here. He stated that the MHVRS Board met and voted unanimously to recommend the Select Board reject the current LAS proposal.

Ms. Matthews pointed out that LAS had responded to 19 calls in Mount Holly. She asked who would respond to those calls in the future if not LAS. Mr. Wood responded that it would be either #1 Regional or #2 Wallingford, as both are in the same district with mutual aid agreements. He also said that Regional has paid staff and Wallingford is an all-volunteer squad with both facing staffing challenges, so they may or may not respond to Mount Holly.

Ms. Matthews noted the figures the Select Board had received from the State through the SIREN program shows 81 calls for Mount Holly with 42 or only 51.9% of those calls responded to by MHVRS. She asked about the discrepancy in numbers from the near 80% call response rate given by Mr. Wood and others as opposed to the State figure of 51.9%. Kristin Veysey responded that she started keeping a call record in March which showed a response rate of 72% through June 30th, and a rate of 78% from July first through December 31st. Discussion followed on reasons why the discrepancies might exist. Ms. Matthews reiterated the importance of EMS care to the community and her concern about missed calls. She asked how the staffing challenges were being addressed. No easy answers, Vicki Seward stated. Mr. Wood read from correspondence from Ray Walker, the head of EMS in the State, who stated that the days of volunteer EMS squads are numbered. Mr. Wood said there is a lot of time devoted to training and that with a volunteer squad, a 100% response rate is not possible as people have jobs and families and cannot respond during the day except on occasion. He again read from Mr. Walker's correspondence that EMS is an essential service to towns as critical as the road crew but there are no volunteer snowplow drivers. Mr. Walker also wrote that volunteerism is no longer sustainable 24/7 365 days a year and that towns must prepare for the days with no volunteers and begin to think about collaborating with other towns facing the same issues.

Ms. Matthews asked Steve Hazelton, who had been referred to several times by Mr. Wood, if he had any thoughts on the situation. Mr. Hazelton explained he had been a resident of Mount Holly for three years now, had been the EMS liaison between EMS services and Rutland Regional Medical Center for about thirty years until 2010, and had instructed many EMS courses. He noted he had not been involved in EMS for the past ten years. He stated that volunteerism is tough nowadays, and he thought volunteer EMS services were a dinosaur that did not yet know it was extinct. He added that quality EMS costs money, and there were no easy answers to the current challenges around staffing and coverage.

Ms. Matthews asked about any steps being taken, any conversations had, the future envisioned for MHVRS given the unanimous agreement over the difficulty of maintaining volunteer EMS squads. Brenda Reed spoke of the new programs Ms. Veysey had initiated around scheduling, electronic calendars, better communications. Ms. Veysey spoke of the stipends now being given and her aim of a consistent 80% response rate. Ms. Seward stated she was on the District 10 Board and that recruitment and retention were always on the agenda and both were statewide and nationwide challenges.

Mark Turco stated he would talk with the Town of Ludlow about the letter and these issues. Ms. Veysey will talk with LAS, and she will talk with Regional and Wallingford about stepping up coverage with response no longer coming from Ludlow. It was agreed that the LAS proposal would be declined.

Ms. Matthews thanked MHVRS for their efforts and dedication in service to the Town. Mr. Wood stood to point out the years of service by various squad members, ranging from four to thirty years. There was a round of applause and a thank-you from the Select Board.

5. Mount Holly School Request – Craig Hutt Vater introduced himself as the Principal of Mount Holly School and thanked the Select Board for a few minutes of time to discuss a potential partnership between the school and the town regarding transportation. He explained that the school budgeting process had been challenging with the need to cut about \$380,000 in expenses in order to not exceed the State threshold, and it appeared that school bus service for both Ludlow and Mount Holly might need to be eliminated, a situation nobody wants. He explained that Ludlow had carried the school transportation costs in its municipal budget for some years but would no longer with the new unified school district. Mr. Hutt Vater said he had attended the Ludlow Select Board meeting the previous evening to discuss the idea he was presenting here about partnering with the Marble Valley bus system

out of Rutland and the Current bus system out of Bellows Falls to provide school transportation wrapped into a municipal transportation system for both towns and partially funded through both towns' budgets. He explained further that this transportation model had the potential to raise additional revenues for both the schools and the towns, as the more riders transported translated into more State transportation aid received. He also said that Vail might be interested in this partnership too as resort transportation.

Kelly Tarbell asked if this idea had been presented to the School Board. Mr. Hutt Vater said no, but it was on the agenda for the meeting tomorrow evening. Ms. Tarbell also asked if the School Board had decided to cut transportation. Mr. Hutt Vater replied that decision had not been made; he was here on his own accord, discussing an idea he thought had merit and needed to be discussed immediately given the deadline for town and school budgets.

Ron Tarbell and Mark Turco asked if any numbers were available for the financial costs to the town, as it was budget night. Mr. Hutt Vater replied he could have a cost-benefit analysis done in a few days if there was interest in pursuing this idea from both towns. Mr. Turco stated it was difficult to express interest in an idea without the associated costs for taxpayers.

Peter Collins said he thought the school budget should be approved by the School Board and the town budget by the Select Board as they are two separate entities. He said that mixing the two was a slippery slope, questioning what other school costs might be wrapped into the town budget in the future. He stated that school-related issues and costs should be in the school budget only. Misters Turco and Tarbell agreed. Mr. Turco stated that moving some school costs into the town budget would misrepresent school costs. Mr. Tarbell asked where it would stop. Mr. Hutt Vater responded that a number of school expenses had been removed from town budgets (rubbish removal, mowing), and this proposal could create revenue for the schools and towns, approaching it as a one-year pilot program. He noted that the Ludlow Select Board had voted to pursue the proposal further by obtaining a financial analysis. He was asking the same of the Mount Holly Select Board, not for a yea or nay on the idea. Mr. Collins reiterated his statement that town and school budgets should be separate, to do otherwise is opening Pandora's Box. Mr. Turco said he had received lots of calls with callers expressing that same sentiment.

There were questions about what would happen to the Mount Holly bus, Ludlow busses and the bus drivers under this proposed system. How would children be transported on field trips without a school bus? Would children be safe on the Bus or the Current, and could parents trust their children would be safe not knowing who else may be onboard the bus. Mr. Hutt Vater noted there had been no problems for the children in Ludlow riding the municipal busses or in Burlington with a similar system.

Annette Lynch stated she found this to be an exciting idea that could create a regional transportation system, but it would take joint planning and an enormous amount of time to determine feasibility.

Mr. Turco agreed. He reiterated his belief that school costs should be in the school budget and town costs in the town budget; they should be kept separate.

Ms. Tarbell asked how revenue would be generated. Mr. Hutt Vater explained that more ridership translated in to more State transportation aid which could offset the \$148,000 for school transportation in the school budget. He further explained that about 25 kids rode the bus in Mount Holly with some families who did not have a car, others who had a car sometimes. With no bus service, some families might move out of town. With lost enrollment comes the loss of the equalized student rate of \$15,000 per pupil.

Raymond Tarbell stated that the Select Board needed to decide whether the town was paying the bill or the school. He thought school expenses should be in the school budget with no reason to combine the two.

Mr. Hutt Vater stated that if Ludlow moved the school transportation costs out the municipal budget in to the school budget, it would mean a huge amount of money would need to be cut for teachers, supplies, etc. to absorb that transportation cost. Ron Tarbell asked what happened to the savings from closing Black River. Mr. Hutt Vater said that \$255,000 was not as much as anticipated.

There was discussion about Act 46 and the bad choices it presented, the number of busses in Mount Holly and Ludlow, the non-profit status of the Marble Valley bus and the Current, and Killington resort's partnership with Marble Valley.

Mr. Hutt Vater explained that if school transportation costs are in the municipal budget in Ludlow, they need to be in the municipal budget of Mount Holly. This is necessary to stay below the State threshold and to avoid the penalty that would be assessed if the school budget is above that threshold amount. School budgets incur the penalty, town budgets do not.

Mr. Turco asked about what fat had been trimmed in the school budget so there was no need to hide school transportation costs in the town budget. Mr. Hutt Vater disagreed with that assessment, stating the proposal was being discussed in a number of public meetings.

Ms. Matthews made a motion to give Mr. Hutt Vater another week to provide the Select Board with additional details and costs associated with his proposal, seconded by Mr. Tarbell. Ms. Matthews and Mr. Tarbell voted for the motion; Mr. Turco voted against it.

There was additional discussion on the need to keep the school and municipal budgets separate, the high cost of living in Vermont and the high taxes here.

6. FY'21 Budget Work Session – Select Board members with Town Treasurer David Johnson and Town Clerk Sue Covalla along with Road Foreman Clinton Woolley went line-by-line through the proposed budget for fiscal year 2021. Some items were increased slightly due to raises or increased costs; a few were actually decreased; and a large number of items were left unchanged, budgeted at last year's amount. A couple of items to highlight on the revenue side are the large increase in Interest Income to be received due to a change in banks to one offering a higher interest rate, and the continued strong sales of Solid Waste Labels. On the expense side, the Garage Bond Interest Expense continues to decrease, and the Reappraisal Reserve Fund increased as the Town nears the need for a town-wide reappraisal. Several social service requests had not yet been received. Final budget numbers will be reviewed at the next Select Board meeting on January 14th.

7. Executive Session: Title 1 V.S.A. S 313(a)(3) – Executive Session was not necessary this evening.

8. Adjourn – Ron Tarbell made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 9:02 pm, seconded by Mark Turco, unanimously agreed.

Respectfully submitted: Jennifer Matthews

Minutes Approved: 1.14.2020