

MINUTES

**SELECT BOARD/ASSESSORS' MEETING
TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2024
WILLIAM L. PULLEN MUNICIPAL BUILDING MEETING ROOM
ONLINE NON-INTERACTIVE ON TOWN HALL STREAMS
6:30 p.m.**

Select Board present: Wayne Kirkpatrick, Adam Fuller, Martha Johnston-Nash, and Steve Migliorini

Others present: Jay Feyler (Town Manager), Jim Murphy (Assessors' Agent), Kathleen Capetta, Christine Simmonds, Erik Amundsen, John Gibbons, and others

- 1. Call Select Board Meeting to Order:** at 6:30 p.m. by Adam Fuller
- 2. Pledge of Allegiance**
- 3. Approve Minutes of Tuesday, August 20, 2024:**

Motion by: Wayne Kirkpatrick
2nd by: Martha Johnston-Nash
4-0

- 4. Approve Treasurer's Warrants dated Tuesday, September 3, 2024:**

Motion by: Wayne Kirkpatrick
2nd by: Martha Johnston-Nash
4-0

- 5. Presentation by Midcoast Villager:**

Publisher Kathleen Capetta spoke about changes to area newspapers. She said she has been working with Reade Brower for three years. The media industry has changed quite drastically. Shifts are needed to continue to serve communities and fulfill the role of a newspaper. They have decided to take all the papers in the area from Knox and Waldo County and *Village Soup* and combine them into one *Midcoast Villager*.

She said everyone is staying on. This is not a cost-cutting venture but rather trying to innovate and provide better coverage. The 20th will be the first day of the new paper.

Managing Editor of *The Courier Gazette* Christine Simmonds said the last edition of the *Courier* will be next week. *Midcoast Villager* is the new version of the *Courier*. They are making sure the local news and coverage remains.

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Kathleen spoke of her belief that local news can still change the world for the better. They want to build community and will open a café, the first in Camden. They hope to have other pop-up cafes or collaborations with existing cafés in other towns. They will also eventually do specialized town digital newsletters. She said it is a process. They hope to increase engagement and participation including in Union.

Adam thanked Kathleen and Christine. Kathleen said they hope to use the board as ambassadors, noting media is no longer a dictation but rather a conversation between the communities and the people on the staff. She confirmed the goal is more local coverage. She has a co-publisher, Will Bleakley. They have to figure out how to get more financial support. Martha noted the importance of getting it right, a place to focus, and getting the word out with the sources of news being so fractured now. Kathleen brought up the book *Stolen Focus* and the need to create trust. She said she welcomes questions/concerns at kcapetta@midcoastvillager.com.

Kathleen said they are moving offices to the Brewster Building in Camden, where they are opening a community café and hope to have lots of civic events with food and drink (where the Bagel Café used to be). Christine said they will be having some history events about the papers. The *Courier Gazette* one is at the Rockland library in October.

Kathleen also said they are starting a new initiative on Solutions Journalism – connecting the dots between just highlighting problems/writing about issues and then finding actual solutions. They are taking it another step hoping to pair philanthropy with reporting and journalism resulting in community action; for example, a mental health columnist to address the current crisis in our schools and communities would be a tangible service.

Jay mentioned a discussion he'd had with Dunkle: (get) newspapers back in the schools if you want people to start reading them. Christine brought up Newspapers in Education. Kathleen talked about the importance of media literacy and offering more content for kids. She said progress will be incremental, and they need corporate sponsorship.

In answer to Martha, Kathleen said they will continue to do Best of the Best and probably make it bigger. In answer to Erik Amundsen re: school board meeting coverage, she mentioned starting to figure out how to use tools like AI to get some of the meeting notes summarized as they don't have enough resources to get to every meeting. She clarified they would never use AI images or AI-written stories, but transcripts automatically generated into summaries could be helpful. She reiterated they want feedback, and this will be an evolution. Christine added people can now use news@midcoastvillager.com.

6. Set tax rate and sign municipal assessors return (Jim Murphy):

Assessors' Agent Jim Murphy said for this year's commitment, we take the net taxes to be raised and divide it by the taxable value of the town to get a mil rate. The lowest mil rate possible is 17.2, which is what he presented tonight and which gives us an overlay of \$19,000 and change.

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He added our maximum mil rate is 18, but he finds no reason discussing it with Jay that we need more money to run the town. He added that the \$19,000 overlay rounds off the number so we're not dealing with half pennies and quarter pennies on tax bills.

Martha thanked Jim for keeping the mil rate as low as possible and agreed with it. Adam noted last year line item 15, net to be raised by the local property tax rate, was \$5.7 million. This year we're at \$6.5 million. He mentioned cost increases in education, county tax (\$70,000), and municipal (\$200,000+). Jay said \$100,000 of the municipal appropriation was the fire station improvements (parking lot) this year, so it will not be in the budget next year. We had a separate warrant article for \$100,000 just for that project. Martha brought up the TCC, which will be discussed at another time. Wayne thanked Jim for his work.

In answer to Adam, Jim said he feels it is borderline criminal for towns not to adjust values in the proper fashion. He said we updated values in 2022. We were at statistically a number of 100.8%; the next year it dropped to 77%; in 2023 we were at 81%, and currently we're at 75%. He thinks the market in some silo segments has stabilized which will be good for us going forward. He said the state audit brings us in at 82% which is consistent with what he's been doing to keep track of our information. He added people are welcome to look at his white board upstairs with 20 years of statistics on it.

Adam confirmed we will potentially not have huge adjustments going forward. Jim spoke about his process, noting towns need to have courage, and our cost of revaluation coming up will be one-sixth of what it would be if we sent it out to bid which would also mean waiting years before we got it. He said St. George is spending \$380,000, and Nobleboro is spending close to \$200,000 to have those reassessments done. He said the biggest cost of revaluation is gathering the data, and we don't have that cost (because he stays on top of the data).

Wayne noted Jim is doing his due diligence. Adam confirmed that Jim keeps office hours on Thursdays if people have any questions. Steve confirmed Jim's target is to have all the classes of properties be as close to 100% as possible. In answer to Adam, Jim said he goes past every property at least twice a year. He tries to do the work without interfering with people's lives. Adam confirmed we have roughly 1,600 households. Jim reiterated the key is good data in the first place, and we are up to speed.

In answer to Martha, Jim said as of April 1 of this year the solar arrays were considered business equipment tax exempt. He worked with the solar array company to make sure he has good inventory as to what they're putting in. He said the town receives half that tax loss in reimbursement from the state, so he has been very aggressive about getting solar arrays onto our records. He added that a Revision rep said he is the only one chasing down solar arrays. Brief discussion followed.

Adam noted the anticipated state municipal revenue sharing went up a decent amount, just under \$200,000. Jim mentioned a May 14 update.

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Jim also said the biggest issue this will be for the 256 taxpayers who had their taxes frozen last year. They will see a two-year jump. He noted the median age in town has gone down to 40.3, and in the past six years roughly 20% of the town has changed hands – 45 to 65 properties. Wayne brought up Steel-Pro, which Jim and Jay said will be under tax deferment financing (TIF). Jim said he has experience with TIFs. MCOG is working with them.

Motion that we accept the tax rate that Jim set forth in this paper, a mil rate of 17.2, by:
Wayne Kirkpatrick
2nd by: Martha Johnston-Nash
4-0

7. Approve Ground Lease Agreement for Town Meeting Warrant:

Jay clarified these are what he sent before with a few word changes. Roger is good with it. The board is approving to put this on the Special Town Meeting Warrant (next item). The townspeople will approve the actual agreement.

Motion to put the Ground Lease Agreement on the Warrant by: Wayne Kirkpatrick
2nd by: Martha Johnston-Nash

In answer to Steve, Jay said the length of the lease is five years, and both parties have an option to renew. Martha read aloud “lessee shall have the right to extend the lease for nine additional five-year terms.” Jay said it’s a pretty good rate, and the lease increases with each thing they put on the pole.

Adam summarized this is a 500 SF cube behind the Public Works garage, a 30’ wide access road out around the garage, and a 150’ monopole. They will pay us \$1,500 per month to lease them that area and ROW. It will increase over the years, 2% inflation. Adam mentioned hopefully connectivity at the school will improve. Jay said they have a space for public safety. In answer to Christine, Jay said a repeater is an option.

Above motion passed,
4-0

8. Approve Warrant for Special Town Meeting November 5th:

Jay said there will be three articles, the first to elect a moderator. Two and three will be by secret ballot – the agreement above, and to see if the town will vote to change the zoning as discussed at the last meeting (change Map 8 Lot 7, Map 8 Lot 7-20, Map 8 Lot 6-002 from Resource Protection to Limited Residential; approved by the planning board).

Motion that we approve the warrant for November 5 by: Wayne Kirkpatrick
2nd by: Steve Migliorini
4-0

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9. Other Business: None.

10. Town Manager Report:

Jay said the fire station out front is complete. We are still waiting for two tests to come back, which the company will handle if they come back inadequate. One concerns compaction and the other pressure strength. He added the company did a really good job. This is the second job they've done for us. He has put them on the preferred bidders list.

He said board members got the message about TCC insurance being cancelled, explaining MMA still covers us for basic liability. We just need to have nobody/nothing in the building which has been vacant, needs roof work, etc.

Also re: TCC, he said he gave the board information from Essex, what she (Christine Baird) gave to the State of Maine last week to help encourage them to make a decision on whether they could go any further on the historic preservation. The biggest concern is how the building has been renovated over the years. We still have not found any original blueprints. Adam confirmed no time frame yet.

Steve confirmed Essex Preservation can go in the building, as they all have their own insurance, and Abraham can still access the building as he's doing safety checks.

Jay said next Tuesday, September 10 the board has an Executive Session with Don Gerrish.

Jay also said all the other paving is done. Chip seal is done. They did an excellent job. Dana's road is built up a lot, with some deep ditches; we should not have a water issue there again. He added any sliding of pavement usually happens within the first week or two – none this time. We haven't gotten a bill yet. Some holes out here in the parking lot will be sealed with polymer asphalt.

Steve brought up the damaged chip seal on Clarry Hill. Jay said MMA (our insurer) has a claim and will go after the guy. Adam mentioned MMA vs. FEMA coverage. Jay said we can't get road damage, culverts, etc. from MMA but could piggyback on a building with both MMA and FEMA. Adam confirmed this case is because of a subcontractor.

11. Public Comment:

Erik Amundsen brought up a couple of things to think about with a new town manager coming on board: a forensic audit, and adding a part-time athletic or Parks and Rec person to manage the tennis and basketball courts, look at Clark Field, etc.

Jay confirmed Erik has been on the school board for 14 years. There has been no forensic audit. Jay added the cost of a forensic audit is astronomical. Adam said we do an audit every year and dug extra deep a couple times with new treasurers.

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Jay suggested Chris Packard might work with the Parks and Rec Committee at no additional expense to the town.

In answer to Steve, Jay said we have all the paperwork ready for our audit with RHR Smith. Normally they would start in July but haven't even finalized the previous audit yet. All the companies are behind. Jay added they usually do all the major stuff in two or three days; most of it is electronic and in the TRIO system. Every year they pull different things; we provide samples of payrolls, etc. The cost budget is \$7,000 now which is very reasonable for an audit. Adam noted they get a pretty clear digital picture from TRIO.

12. Committee Reports:

a. Broadband

John Gibbons said all indications are the expansion of the fiber network is progressing smoothly. There's been no status update of numbers in a number of weeks. The committee met last week for a focused discussion of where we are now and where we expect to be at the end of the grant funding expansion, against the original objective of providing broadband access all over town.

He said when the expansion is complete, almost 2/3 of all addresses in town will have fiber access. Of the rest, there will be about 100 that don't have access to any broadband source, and a few hundred that have access to cable. The committee will soon sit down with Spectrum to discuss their plans for evolution of their cable network in Union. Spectrum's parent company, Charter, is doing a lot converting cable to fiber nationwide. They were the big winner in a grant round that took place about a year ago for improving small towns north and west of here building fiber networks on cable networks at the time. There are no indications at this point that Union is front and center in their plans. He reiterated the committee will meet with them in next month or so.

Re: the 100 or so after the grant supported expansion is complete that have access to neither fiber nor cable, John said Tidewater has offered to work with us to figure out how to bring fiber to those pockets of addresses that don't have many options. He said radio is the backup and spoke briefly of Starlink and the cellular companies. In sum he thinks we are in good shape; the committee is trying to get a grip on what needs to be done next and what our options are. The board thanked John.

Adam emphasized fiber access for 2/3 of the town was pulled off through partnerships at the federal and state levels, without having to raise individual money from Union-specific taxpayers. He said this takes us to another level as a town and is key to our future. He added John has spearheaded it and dragged this thing across the line. He emphasized the importance of high speed internet in housing choices, especially if you have kids in school.

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- b. Thompson Working Group – Above /Town Manager Report.
- c. Resiliency Committee

Jay said the first meeting has been rescheduled for September 11.

Adam brought up an email from Argy with a sign update. Public Works helped remove the existing sign and excavated a spot for a new signpost.

13. Select Board Report:

Martha asked if the board had any more thoughts re: the Sestercentennial certificate (savings given to them from the Bicentennial). Adam favored rolling it or planting another tree. Wayne favored rolling it. Steve asked about the original intent. Martha said the select board should find a good purpose. Adam said lots of people have loved the benches. Picnic tables were mentioned. Jay urged caution about adding more monuments, benches, etc. to the Common considering its future as open green space.

Christine Simmonds read aloud from a letter in a Camden National Bank booklet with the \$100 deposit: “This account was to be turned over to the select board in 2024 to be spent as they saw fit in the best interest of the town.” Steve said to be spent is not roll it over. Martha said she sent everyone a copy of the letter. Consensus was think on it more.

Adam thanked Christine again for coming to cover meetings, adding she has reached out a bunch of times over the years and done much to clarify issues. Plenty of times she could’ve used clickbait headlines but didn’t.

Adam asked Jay what he’d like to do for his last meeting. Jay said he will run it, and they’ll be out in 15 minutes. Wayne said we will miss Jay.

14. Adjourn:

Motion by: Steve Migliorini
2nd by: Martha Johnston-Nash
4-0

Meeting adjourned at 7:59 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Sherry Abaldo
Secretary