

BENNINGTON SELECT BOARD
BENNINGTON FIRE FACILITY
130 RIVER STREET
BENNINGTON, VERMONT 05201

JANUARY 29, 2018

MINUTES

SELECT BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Thomas Jacobs-Chair; Donald Campbell-Vice Chair; Jim Carroll; Carson Thurber; Jeannie Jenkins; Chad Gordon and Jeanne Conner.

SELECT BOARD MEMBERS ABSENT:

ALSO PRESENT: Stuart Hurd-Town Manager; Melissa Currier-Finance Director; Laura Block; Robert Block; Joey Kulkin; William Stewart; Justin Woodie; Jackie Prue; Al Bashevcan; Lynn Green; Douglas Cross; Sam Restino; Londa Weisman; Brendan Coogan; 30 citizens; CAT-TV; Jim Therrien-Bennington Banner and Nancy H. Lively-Secretary.

At 6:00 pm, Chair Thomas Jacobs called the meeting to order.

1. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Recited by all present.

2. PUBLIC HEARING, PROPOSED AMENDMENTS, TO THE CHARTER OF THE TOWN OF BENNINGTON

Mr. Jacobs explained the process of the Public Hearings, and Mr. Campbell read the petition to add a new section to the Charter 24A V.S.A. Chapter 103 that will be before the voters on March 6, 2018 to replace the Town Manager and adopt a mayoral form of government.

The following citizens expressed their comments/opinions on the subject:

Al Bashevcan: Mr. Bashevcan has lived in Bennington for over 30 years through all of the changes and improvements that have taken place during that time, and appreciates the leadership that the Town Manager has provided. He supports keeping our current form of government - "maybe we could tweak it, but we should keep it" - because we need an individual running our town that has the experience to do so and not someone who has won a popularity contest. In addition, a "grave concern" to Mr. Bashevcan is that the petition grants the mayor the right to veto any Select Board decision which is too much power in one person.

Joey Kulkin: Mr. Kulkin, speaking to the silent majority, feels this is the perfect time to go for a mayor and cited the recent salt shed issue where the Town Manager approved building the salt shed without a permit in place which may cost the Town \$42,000 in fines, as well as, not taking advantage of a grant for \$340,000 that would have paid for most of the shed. The Select Board is not working in the town's best interest on this issue, and if a mayor had done that, he/she could be voted out. Mr. Kulkin also noted a "24' mountain of dirt and asphalt that has been dumped by the river" and questioned where this material came from. The Select Board refuses to answer questions, whereas, a mayor would have to.

Justin Woodie: Mr. Woodie has lived in Bennington his whole life and criticized the Town Manager and Select Board over the salt shed issue, and in general. He disagrees with the statement from the Charter Committee

Co-Chair saying that “a mayor form of government is more like a monarchy than a democracy” noting it is just the opposite. A mayor must answer to the voters and offers more transparency to the citizens than we currently have.

William Stewart: Mr. Stewart announced that he is running for the Select Board and noted that voting to support the petition for mayor “does not change our present system”. “It allows us to have a mayor instead of a Town Manager” and stated that the Select Board blamed the Manager and denied any responsibility in the recent salt shed issue. Bennington has no leadership and the mayor “will not have any independent powers” but, with the veto option over the Select Board, “will be responsible where no one is responsible today”. “We are in need of better ideas, the old system is not working.”

Jackie Prue: Ms. Prue agrees with the past speakers and will “probably vote for a mayor” because the voters don’t presently have a voice. There are three minutes to speak twice a month with no answers received. The town has a drug problem, issues at the senior center and issues with our kids. “We have to do a lot more for our kids, and a lot more for our elderly.”

Melissa Currier: Ms. Currier has been Finance Director for the Town over 11 years, and does not feel that “an elected mayor should be responsible for the day-to-day operations of the Town”. The Town needs someone who knows how to run a business, manage employees, and have an understanding of the type of business being run. The newly elected, albeit popular, mayor will need to be trained by the department managers with no guarantee that this person will pick things up quickly, or at all. We will be “training up” instead of being led by our Town Manager. This process will slow down operations which will be costly to the tax payers. Plus, if there is a new mayor elected every year, the training process will start all over. The current system of the Select Board being able to hire, or fire, the Town Manager should remain in place.

Laura Block: Ms. Block “agreed totally” with what Ms. Currier said that the Town needs an experienced administrator and, with all of the progress going on in the Downtown, it is the wrong time to change our form of government. However, the message coming across is that the Select Board needs to have better oversight, and the suggested charter changes presented by the Charter Committee in regards to the Select Board help to address some of that. It is “fantasy” to think that having a mayor is going to improve the economic development of Bennington. Ms. Block feels that we should keep our current form of government with the recommended charter changes and improved Select Board oversight.

Robert Block: Mr. Block noted that many towns in New York State have a Town Manager and Select Board, as well as, a mayor. This creates additional expenses and “is not working over there”.

Lynn Greene: Ms. Greene supports our current form of government and would not want to see the projects in the Downtown get “derailed” because we have created a “self-inflicted wound” by changing our form of government. The Select Board can hire, or fire, the Town Manager with 90 days’ notice, whereas, we would not be able to remove a mayor until the next election. The salt shed issue is not a reason to change our form of government. An additional person would be an additional financial burden to the Town, and we should focus on dealing with individual problems with the government that is in place.

Douglas Cross: Mr. Cross has lived in Bennington for 41 years and feels that Mr. Hurd, though he has made some mistakes, has done “an excellent job” for the last 25 years. Also, the petition states some of the powers of the mayor - but not all of them - and doesn’t state how long he/she will be elected for. Keeping the current system is what we need.

Sam Restino: Mr. Restino explained to the public that, if the petition for mayor passes, it doesn't take effect right away because it still has to go before the legislature where they can accept it or not. He is "split" as to how he should vote. Mr. Jacobs added that this petition was initiated by the public and there will be other charter changes put before the voters in June, so whatever form of government we have, "is a work in progress".

Londa Weisman: Ms. Weisman has lived in North Bennington for 55 years and agreed with Laura Block's comments. No one is perfect and "it would be delusional" to think that we're going to find this "perfect mayor who is going to make things work out just the way we want it". We need to be "realistic" and try to improve our existing system.

Brendan Coogan: Mr. Coogan, a retired social studies teacher, is in favor of a petition "if it is a good idea, unfortunately, I don't think this one is a good idea". The Town Manager runs the town and reports to the Select Board who gives guidance. "Stuart Hurd has done an excellent job for 20 years. Who hasn't made a mistake?" Mr. Coogan will vote to keep our current form of government.

At 6:47pm, the Public Hearing, Proposed Amendments, To The Charter of The Town of Bennington was closed.

3. APPROVE CORRECTED FY2019 ANNUAL MEETING WARNING

Mr. Hurd explained that there were some errors, both current and historical, on the original Warning that have been corrected. The corrected Warning is being submitted for approval.

Donald Campbell moved and Jim Carroll seconded to approve the Corrected FY2019 Annual Meeting Warning as submitted. The motion carried unanimously.

At 6:58pm, Carson Thurber moved and Jeannie Jenkins seconded the adjournment of the meeting. The motion carried unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Nancy H. Lively

Secretary