

Selectmen's Meeting
Monday, January 10, 2022
Town Hall – 7PM

MINUTES

Pledge of Allegiance

Attendees include Robert Fee – Chair, Chris Madden – Selectmen, Stephen McGerty – Selectmen, Michelle Pong – Town Administrator and Vickie Williams – Secretary

Guests include Harry Power – Compliance Officer, Randy Weaver – Fire Chief, Trevor Anderson – Deputy Fire Chief, Karen Bell – Town Clerk/Tax Collector, Keene Deputy Tax Collector, Noreen & Ray Durand, Chris Pong, Joe Traniello, Terri LaRoche and Margo Santoro.

Old Business:

Tax Rate –

Bob Fee Statement: “We had an issue with our balances on the books. Once again social media a lot of stuff circling around. I will tell you as a Selectmen I will not comment on anything I see on Facebook page officially, unless it is general information, or some feel good comment.

Otherwise this is where I make my statements. In this past year I have not seen such hostility toward this Select board in this past year. I have been in this Town a long time. One of the most hostile years I have dealt with. Between people making accusations of us lying, cheating and sneaking around, that is unacceptable in my book. I am transparent, you can ask me whatever you want and I will tell you exactly what the answer is, If I can legally.

So we had a situation, the person involved and the person responsible for the balances is the Treasurer and Administrative Assistant. There were some discrepancies in our books, on top of that our Accounting Firm dumped us during the year. Had to get a new Auditing Firm, we had to adjust things with them, we had to go with their plans. We found discrepancies and Michelle Pong and her husband Chris, who is an Accountant by trade have balanced our books for us. We still have other things to do and I am not an Accountant. Mr. Pong if you have any specifics on what you found with the books”

Chris Pong –

“Sure, I am Michelle's husband have been an accountant for 25 years. I work for CNS Wholesale Groceries, a 15 billion plus dollar organization. So I reconciled balances all my life. The Problem Stoddard encountered was a perfect storm. Technology problems, process problems and overall acumen in accounting knowledge problems. The ERP package the Town uses is excessively old, 25 to 35 years old, a dos based environment. It is highly antiquated, I believe it was problem 1. A very difficult system to use. #2 Process is an opportunity where the Town has had a bit of a challenge in terms of being able to perform the cash reconciliations and to work with the system to get any accounted for and unaccounted variances in the system. The 3rd comes down to

acumen. Acumen is when you add up $a + b + c = j$ there is not a lot of acumen experience in the Treasurers office to address that effectively.

The Physical 2021 books have been fully reconciled. I have been in the Town Offices inputting the data into the BSMI system used by the Town. We will get the balances out to the Auditors within the next 48 to 72 hours. Then the Auditors will use that information and pass it on to the State. Be happy to answer any questions.”

Terri LaRoche

“I have a question, when you say we have all these problems within the Town, technology, process and acumen are you helping to address this or who in the Town is addressing this problem within the Town so we do not have the same problems next year?”

Bob Fee

“Moving forward we will have a bookkeeper that will every month go over our balances. We will upgrade our software because it desperately needs it. Keep in mind our Treasurer is an elected official, not appointed. So the citizens of the Town of Stoddard put the Treasurer in place. As an elected official we have no right to step over her.”

Terri LaRoche

“Who is the Town Treasurer?”

Bob Fee

“Pat Putnam”

Terri LaRoche

“Is that a hired position?”

Bob Fee

“No, it is an elected official.”

Terri LaRoche

“So with everything that was messed up and what was finally uncovered have we resolved it. When are we going to get the MS35 to the State?”

Chris Pong

“As I stated the balances will go out to the Auditor within 48 to 72 hours. Then the Auditor goes through it and sends it to the State.”

Terri LaRoche

“You mentioned the Auditing firm dropped us during the year, Why?”

Michelle Pong

“They had a partner quit went to another job and took a couple employees with them. Cutting down on clients because of the loss did not have time to do it.”

Terri LaRoche

“When did that happen?”

Michelle Pong

“They let us go in September. We put out an RFP as soon as possible. We hired the new firm in October, by the time the contract was signed they started working with us in November.”

Stephen McGerty

“Michelle, when do you think the actual tax bills will go out.”

Michelle Pong

“Very leery to give an actual date because as Chris said in 72 hours we will have all the information to the auditors they need. The auditors need this information to fill out the MS35 for the State. Once the State has the information they are fairly quick. They have all other information needed from the Town. Once we get the tax rate the tax bills will be sent out.”

Stephen McGerty

“The only reason I asked is rumor control, as the town in overworking themselves in rumor. Some folks feels say it comes out Feb 1 they have 30 days to pay it, and then will receive a Tax Bill in June right on top of the First tax bill.”

Bob Fee

“Every person in town is in the same boat.”

Noreen Durand

“People should have been saving money all along for that, they know taxes are paid twice a year.”

Margo Santoro

“Why was it stated in the last meeting the tax rate was available in the minutes?”

Chris

“Should have said will be set.”

Margo Santoro

“The minutes say has been set. We have indicated to everybody in Town we are waiting on the State. Many people called the State, and the State said we were waiting on the Town. It sounds like that is what is happening. The Town is holding up the game.”

Terri LaRoche

“I am the one who started it in good faith. I was told by this Town we were waiting on the State. So to be helpful I called the State. So I asked them what are you waiting for? Imagine my surprise when they said they were waiting for the Town MS35. So to be helpful again, I shared this news with everyone on facebook. Wrote to Michelle and Karen. You have to call the State there is some miscommunication on this. Now it got a little out of control. We don’t want to

throw Karen under the bus. Going to be honest I was mistrustful and still mistrustful. Perception is 99 percent of it.”

Bob Fee

“Did you ask me personally or anyone else on the board? No you did not.”

Terri LaRoche

“I asked Karen Bell who does she work for?”

Bob Fee

“Karen Bell is an elected official. She works for Karen Bell, she works for the people of Stoddard. She does not answer to the Selectmen.”

Karen Bell

“I will own part of this because my wording was such that my office was waiting on the Tax Rate from the State. I will own that part as I said to you on my Facebook message Terri. Last night perhaps I should have added that we were waiting on a report. I acknowledge that was an error on my part. I was trying to keep it as simple as possible. I have handled numerous calls, emails, private messages, calls at home where is the tax rate? If I went into every single detail on why the tax rate was not here yet I would be on the phone day and night. I did not know all the details till last night when Michelle and I spoke, can you give me any idea there is so much chatter on Facebook. It’s a systematic situation because of my wording. I apologized for that. I had no idea about the books or what the actual problem was.”

Terri LaRoche

“Do we have a communication problem in Town. Should we not have told Karen what the hold up was knowing she would get questions? Somebody needs to be accountable here. Our townspeople and tax payers were misled. I went to try and help and looked like a fool not knowing it was the Town when talking to the State. So what can we learn from this? Somebody really needs to apologize to the townspeople for this kabash right? And something needs to be done moving forward. Either keep Karen up to date and be transparent or don’t answer any of the questions on Facebook and eliminate the chatter because then you have people like me blowing up. My hackles are up. Perception is 99 percent reality and if you do not like my perception I have of this panel. You need to change it all of you.”

Bob Fee

“I do not care what you think of me, absolutely do not care. I did not lie to you, I never said anything contrary to that. You are accusing someone like me of not being transparent. If you had asked me who was responsible for all this, all you had to do was pick up the phone and call me, you did not. I would have told you straight up and let me straighten this out now, the Treasurer is responsible.”

Margo Santoro

“The question was asked in the last meeting they said the rate was set when it really wasn’t. Said we were waiting on the State?”

Chris Madden

"Margo you sat up here a lot of things have been misspoken by every member of the Select board at one time or another. Think its easy come on up here. A lot of things can not be said because they are done in nonpublic session You should know that."

Margo Santoro

"I am not saying it is a problem you accidently published in the minutes the rate was set, when it wasn't. The blame has been stated on the web page and the minutes waiting on the State."

Chris Madden

"We are waiting on the State."

Karen Bell

"I am the Tax Collector of Stoddard and I am waiting for the State to give me the Tax Rate."

Margo Santoro

"The State is waiting for us."

Chris Madden

"No technically Karen is waiting for the State. It is a whole separate position. The State is waiting for the audit information."

Karen Bell

"Imagine if I had to go through this explanation with every person every time I got a phone call. I only knew there was 1 report not up yet. I owned that part of it. Why do we have to sit here and find blame why can't we just realize this happened and its being worked on and fixed. No one is not being transparent. We can't be more transparent. You can come into my office and look at anything you need to its all public record."

Terri LaRoche

"Not necessarily trying to assign blame, but pinpoint where we went wrong as a Town."

Chris Madden

"As a Town, 5 to 6 years ago it started and snowballed from there out of control. The Treasurer has been at fault for that long. The previous Town Manager did a hell of a job getting the books together every year. Then we ran into this problem. We have spent a lot of time, we meaning Michelle and Her husband, the auditors everybody sifting through trying to find these mistakes, not every nitty gritty detail is shared with the Selectmen, we are kept informed as things progressed. We had hoped the tax rate would have been set at the end of that week fingers crossed. Nobody knew the full extent of the problems till tonight."

Stephen McGerty

"Not going to throw anybody under the bus here, but hopefully this will never happen again, but maybe the Selectmen should put something out on the website something is wrong who to contact."

Terri LaRoche

"I think that would be better a statement on the website, We don have a report done, waiting on auditors, working on diligently, stay tuned. Transparency, honesty and integrity is the way to go."

Stephen McGerty

"Hopefully this will never happen again and that may be a better route in the future."

Do not know who made this comment

"This is the 2nd year in a row they have been late. They were late last year too. I am not pointing fingers."

Karen Bell

"I can't even stay right now. I am so pissed off right now. You have no idea what we went through last year dealing with covid and the taxes."

Margo Santoro

"No one here is not saying your not transparent."

Bob Fee

ORDER

Stephen McGerty

"I just wanted Karen to now nobody is throwing her under the bus. I think maybe we could have done something different, it is not you Karen."

Karen Bell

"I tend to take it personally my job is important to me. I would never lie or deceive. My mistake is I used the wrong wording and Terry LaRoche had to call the DRA. I'm sorry, Sorry I wasted your time, Sorry, you were embarrassed apparently. I would say I wish there had been better communication, but it is such a minor issue. Last year most taxes were late in every town in the State because of covid."

Terri LaRoche

"Its all perception. I heard from many people its what Karen told them. So, unfortunately may not be Karens fault but they heard it from Karen and find out it is not true."

Karen Bell

"But it is true, I am waiting on the State for the Tax Rate."

Terri LaRoche

"Well it may not be the whole story, we heard different things here. But it is perception problem. Karen may not be at fault."

Karen Bell

“Bob I am taking your advice and not commenting on facebook, just serve and everybody can just wonder not going to answer any questions unless they call my office.”

Terri LaRoche

“Why can’t we embrace social media more.”

Bob Fee

“Because of the daggers that get thrown people have a lot of courage behind a keyboard. Facebook should not be used as an official anything. Its garbage. It is a media site controlled by a bunch of algorithms and mines your data.”

“The Treasurer was ultimately responsible why did nobody call and ask her?”

Terri LaRoche

“I did not know who was responsible for this.”

Bob Fee

“Thirty seconds on google told me who was responsible. When asking the State who is responsible for the balancing of the Town books? Answer the Treasurer.”

Margo Santoro

“But we were told the books were balanced and were waiting on the State.”

Bob Fee

“Nothing stated said the books were balanced.”

Margo Santoro

“We did not understand what was happening.”

Chris Madden

“So you believe what is on social media than actually coming to a meeting and asking?”

Bob Fee

“Order, this is getting out of hand. If you want to burn us at the stake we will set up a special Selectmens meeting next week.”

Michelle Pong

“I did not want to get involved in this conversation, but I do want to say we have not been sitting on our hands. We have all been working incredibly hard to get this done. Not to just get us through this year but to be sustainable in the years to come. Not an easy task to undertake. You have to understand the people working in the Town are working for your best interest we have nothing to gain by having the tax bills out late. We gain nothing by trying to deceive the public. To start throwing acquisitions around calling people names is not productive. The people in this office and at this table deserve your respect for what they do everyday. It is understandable

words will get misspoken. No one is perfect. Your elected officials are working really hard to fix this problem. Trying to lay blame is not going to make it go any quicker.”

Stephen McGerty

“Your husband had said they will be going to the State in 48 to 72 hours. Are the books straightened out?”

Michelle Pong

“The books are all balanced outside of the program the Town actually uses. The Books are balanced for the year. We have it all done on excel. Now Chris is inputting the information into the Town program being used. So the information can be given to the Auditors in the format they need to complete the audit. Chris is doing all this work pro bono not charging the Town anything.”

Keene Deputy Tax Collector asked to make a statement.

“Karen is a great employee and Tax Collector she has pride and integrity in her work. I have seen how she deals with the public she treats everyone fairly. I have seen her do everything she can to help a customer. She is a phenomenal person, you are lucky to have her.”

Stephen motioned we move on from this subject. Bob Seconded. Motion carried.

Appointments:

Harry Power – Compliance Officer

Of note spoke to Michelle about a couple of violations we will get to next week.

123/11 – Montana – Turtle Rock Road – for solar panels. Has permit for lot loading of the roof.
Pd \$50.00

122/32 – Douglas – Contractor – Whitney Road – Putting up a house. Has all approvals needed.
Pd \$500.00

116/23 – Barden – Cold Storage Building – Pd \$200.00

418/2 – Donall Healy – Aten Rd – Garage workshop/Lean to – meets all the setbacks. Pd

418/22 – Donall & Mary Healy – 1 bedroom cottage – Pd \$500.00

To Be Signed/Approved:

1. A/R and/or P/R manifest
2. Minutes of 12/13/2021-changes made
3. Minutes of 12/27/2021-after changing will to supposed
4. Yield Tax Warrant

All Signed & Approved

Old Business:

Direct Deposit

Pat working on getting it into the system. Stephen asked about working with ADP. Michelle stated it can cost up to \$5,000.00 dollars a month using a system like ADP. Looking for a bookkeeper to balance the books for the Town every month.

The Treasurer is an elected position, there is no preresiquit to being treasurer. The Town can make it a non elected position if voted on at Town Meeting.

Post Office

The Post office will be staying in Town at the Mill Village Store.

Fire Dept Budget

Randy Weaver – Fire Chief and Trevor Anderson – Deputy Fire Chief

Good with next years Budget

Purchase order for another lock for the Old Fire Station – Key pad System

Signed/Approved by Board

Bob Fee examined the back of the Old Fire Station. Should be wrapped up for the winter. The back side should be replaced next spring/summer

Update on the new Fire Rescue Truck

Waiting on the chassis. Will make down payment when the chassis is available.

Will need structural gear soon for the Department.

Vaccine Clinic – February 5, 2022, 9 – 11 am at the Fire Station. For 1st dose, 2nd dose and boosters. Will be a walk-in clinic for ages 5 an up. Will post on Town website.

January 19, 2022 will have a large water rescue training on Highland Lake with several Towns and State workers and fire departments.

New Business:

None

Stephen McGerty

Should we put locks on the thermostat. Wheeler who just replaced the Town Hall boiler says moving the temps up and down all the time are bad. And look into getting a fan for that boiler room gets very hot. Should just leave the temperature at 68 degrees

Stephen McGerty

I spoke with Chief Vaillencourt about the painted lines on Kings Highway

Stephen McGerty

When tax bills are sent out do we put postage on or use bulk rate? Answer – they are sent out bulk rate.

Public Comment (Non Agenda Items Only)

Terry LaRoche

‘Today Agenda was not posted why? It is a minor thing but my husband is high risk, I have to be double masked. You have to commit to having the Agenda out so I can see if it is worth the risk to come to a meeting.’

Michelle Pong

“I do apologize, it is my first day back after being out with covid. This is the first time it happened, it is usually posted on the Thursday before the meeting.”

Terry LaRoche

“For the time being can we not go back to wearing masks in the town buildings. It is very risky for my husband. Considering the numbers are rising, I would like some consideration on this. You also alluded to something being wrong with the heat, May I ask what the problem was?”

Stephen McGerty

Been having problems with the Boiler in the Town Hall. The boiler needed to be replaced. There was no heat in the building.

Terry LaRoche

“So its replaced and all good.”

Bob Fee

“Yes”

Margo Santoro

Want to reiterate about the masks. Till done with the Omicron strain. Should make it mandatory for the next couple of weeks.

Bob Fee

Just to give you an update on masks. ABC just did a report the cloth and paper masks do not give that much protection the only thing that seems to really work are the N95 masks

Trevor Anderson

Numbers are rising in the State. There are many various studies on the effectiveness of masks. There is a public perception that masks actually work – going on that presumption might be an idea to instate something about masks

MASKS WILL BE PUT ON THE AGENDA FOR THE NEXT MEETING

Noreen Durand

“Would like to go on record and see it in the minutes, Vickie, to make sure all of you Chris, Bob and Stephen, Yes I can be a pain in the royal butt. But, I also appreciate all the time you give to this town.

Chris motioned to adjourn the meeting. Bob Seconded. Motion Carried.

Meeting adjourned at 8:15 PM

Submitted

Vickie Williams – Secretary

Robert Fee_____

Christopher Madden _____

Stephen McGerty _____