

**Minutes of Joint Meeting of Brandon Selectboard and Budget Advisory Committee**  
2 December 2024, Brandon Town Hall

Selectboard present: Doug Bailey, Heather Nelson, Tim Guiles, Ralph Ethier.

Budget committee present: Karen Rhodes, Barry Varian, Tricia Welch, Jan Coolidge, Gabe McGuigan.

Attendance

Public present: Cecil Reniche-Smith, Andy Jackson, Gerard Lowell, Mike VonSchleusingen, Aidan Alnwick, Ethan Kelleher, Joseph Mannino, Jaime Quenneville, Brianna Stevens-Clark, Shayla Phillips, Skylar Phillips, Carly Stevens, Linda Graziano, Jacolyn Savela, David Kachajian, Steven Jupiter, Michael Brown, Thomas Kilpeck, Billy Bullock, George Fjeld, Jeff Cohen, Cindy Cohen.  
By Zoom: Kelly Coolidge and several others.

Selectboard Chair Doug Bailey called the meeting to order at 7:00PM.

Agenda  
Addition

An agenda item to approve the resolution and loan documents for the previously-approved purchase and financing method of the replacement highway truck was added.

On motion of Ralph Ethier and second by Ralph Ethier, the amended agenda was adopted by the selectboard 4-0.

Selectboard  
Remarks

Doug Bailey and Heather Nelson offered remarks related to the goals of the community and assuming best intentions of all participants and to address and clarify some comments on the budget that had been circulating in the community recently.

HWY Truck  
Bank Note

Tim Guiles moved to borrow the sum of \$100,000 to buy a replacement highway truck and authorizes Susan Gage or Seth Hopkins to advance loan funds on behalf of the Town. Carried 4-0, Selectboard present (4) to sign the loan documents including note tonight.

Police  
Department  
Budget and  
Staffing

Seth Hopkins was asked to introduce what he had distributed to the board and budget committee over the weekend with three scenarios for the police budget. He described the impact of those three choices and relayed the town treasurer's help in confirming that the appropriation article in FY25 (depending on whether it is requested and passed or not in FY26) represents a change to a property tax bill but will not change the % figure in the operating budget.

Tim Guiles spoke to the advisory question results, the coverage in other Rutland County communities, and the balancing of different priorities in the budget-making process. Barry Varian sought to confirm the level of service expected by the voters on the budgets considered by the voters in March, April, and May 2024. Chief Kachajian advised the \$1M option would maintain the 24-hour coverage with the staff we have currently (Chief plus 6). The level-funded option would lose one officer. He advised this is the only department fully staffed in the State right now. One officer is likely to be changing to another agency within a month. We would be on-call six hours a day with ten-hour shifts, and on-duty 18 hours a day. The staffing reduction of the model cutting \$100,000 would limit the proactive kind of policing and be limited in response. We would have to reduce the number of officers on shift and on-call for 6 or 8 hours per day, and would not be the recommended level of staffing per shift.

Jan Coolidge warned against not learning from mistakes; encouraged level funding and being resolved against one-officer shifts for safety. She also cautioned against burnout due to short

staffing. Barry Varian queried further about the level of service in the level-funded scenario. Doug Bailey offered a thumbnail estimate construction of what might be reasonable to expect for staffing at various funding levels. Chief Kachajian engaged with professional input on various questions from the board and budget committee. Tricia Welch asked whether 24-hour coverage could be attained at less than \$1M. Cecil Reniche-Smith asked about the potential of replacing the moving-along officer with an overtime-exempt position such as a lieutenant, especially one who lives in or very near to Town. The Chief responded favorably to this concept and confirmed it has been explored to some degree. He also mentioned grant-writing opportunities would increase with this kind of position added.

Heather Nelson supported Barry Varian's concept of considering what the expected level of service has been and not falling back from that level, particularly in light of the majority vote favoring provision of more coverage on the March 2024 ballot. She also described next year's budget and the current year's budget as related but separate and stated she would consider level funding or an increase of some amount. She encouraged a straw poll of the board to indicate which options are still worth consideration and which should be off the table. Ralph Ethier inquired about why the officer leaving would not be replaced in the current budget; the Chief answering that the overage in overtime expended in the current year has to be remedied in the current year. Ralph expressed support for a level-funded budget and 18 hours on duty plus 6 hours on call ("18/6"); he feels that raising more tax money to support the full 24-hour coverage is not likely to gain voter approval. He emphasized the affordability message from the voters in 2024 elections. Doug Bailey related his support for the police department over a decade of involvement on the selectboard and budget committee. He acknowledged the affordability message. He does not want to see us lay off an officer we have invested in. He believes an 18/6 model is most suitable for Brandon, optimally with a chief and a lieutenant who live in Brandon or very locally for on-call purposes. He recommended staggering shift starts but does worry about burnout. He's not afraid of going in with a budget higher for police but emphasized it would need support from the board and budget committee to succeed with the voters. Karen Rhodes recommended consideration of the benefits of a robust public safety program.

8PM

Tim Guiles stated that he has never felt unsafe living in Vermont, even in towns with no police department. He posited that the 55%/45% vote might be different with a dollar figure attached to it and likewise called the meeting's attention to the affordability message of several elections in 2024. He recommended the \$750K department in the budget with an appropriation article to offer voters more choice and more say in the size of the department. Barry Varian counseled against the appropriation concept as he feels it commodifies police officers. Tim Guiles agreed that once the choice is made it would be incorporated into the budget, not an annual question. Others spoke to the costs and benefits of the appropriation, especially in the second year.

Heather Nelson observed that three selectboard members tonight had expressed support for a level-funded police budget. She re-examined her own proposal from several meetings ago in which she had initiated the idea of the appropriation. She worries about the down-the-road impact of the appropriation question. She observed that in the current management's organization of the budget, there are four main mission areas (public works, public safety, administration & finance, community development) and explored the value of separating out the budget at least somewhat in presenting the voters separate votes. Tom Kilpeck observed that the current level of staffing is short-staffing for providing 24-hour on-duty coverage and that is the true reason for the overtime overage in the current fiscal year. Several questions and answers followed regarding the overtime situation. Mike Brown spoke as a 22-year resident who has been a recipient of the professional services of the police and believes the 45% who opposed 24-hour on-duty coverage may not have been in a position of needing those services but that

lives are at stake. He offered a complimentary assessment of the Chief's capabilities and demeanor. He believes the unstated message is that the officers are saying "help" to the community and the selectboard. In a return to discussion of disaggregating the budget by mission areas / departments, Jan Coolidge expressed that the selectboard has been elected to make those tough decisions and present a unified plan of core services to the voters. Others on the budget advisory committee requested clarification on what the benefit of disaggregating the budget by mission/department would be. Heather Nelson and Gabe McGuigan responded regarding the value the community assigns to policing and safety. The interconnectedness of the departments in supporting each other was noted. "We lose a lot for a little, and we gain a lot with a little." A straw poll of the budget advisory committee saw no one advocating for the cut budget, two in favor of the level-funding, two in favor of the increased budget at \$1M, and one budget committee member at a figure in between those two.

Heather Nelson offered a motion to set the police budget at \$950,000, and Ralph Ethier seconded. The Chief believes this would still leave some on-call time and the \$1M would be the minimum required for 24-hour on-duty. Doug Bailey observed that the difference contemplated in this increase would be about the same as the appropriation article approved for paving in the current year. The budget number would still go up as a % but the tax bill impact would be negated if the article were not requested or approved. Jamie Quenneville described to the meeting her experience as a Brandon business owner but resident of another town without its own police department. She advocated for the benefit of full 24-hour on-duty coverage in Brandon. Cecil Reniche-Smith recommended finding a sweet spot number between level funding and full 24-hour on-duty coverage, and being realistic in the level of service that would support.

Heather Nelson amended her motion to \$1,000,000 which would be 24-hours but not two officers at all times; a second was not forthcoming. Ralph Ethier suggested level funding at ~\$875,000 and then an appropriation of \$125,000 to fund overtime. Andy Jackson related from his experience in Rescue that if the officers do not feel supported we will lose officers, and that level funding does not indicate strong support. The vote on the original motion to include \$950,000 was 2 (Bailey, Nelson) in favor and 2 (Guiles, Ethier) opposed. The motion failed.

Next Meeting Doug Bailey spoke for the board and conveyed to those in attendance the board's respect for the police officers and their efforts. The next meeting will be December 16th at 7PM.

Recess The meeting was recessed at 9:05. On motion of Tim Guiles seconded by Heather Nelson and voted 4-0, at 9:16 the selectboard entered executive session per 1 VSA § 313 (a) (3) regarding the evaluation of an employee. The board returned to public session at 9:41. No action was required.

Executive Session

On motion of Ralph Ethier seconded by Heather Nelson and voted unanimously, the board adjourned at 9:41 PM.

Respectfully submitted,



Seth M Hopkins, town manager