Town of Panton Chartered 1761

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Selectboard Meeting Minutes
June 24, 2024

In attendance: Selectboard Chair Howard Hall, Selectboard Vice-Chair Teresa Boucher, Town Clerk & Treasurer Maggie McCormick, Sharon Ashcraft, Cindy Cooke, Kathy Kennett, Chuck Kennett, John Viskup, M'Lissa Dayton, Jamie Dayton, Terry Pelletier

Via Zoom: Reed Wills, Dave Hazel, Sean Sullivan, Lorraine Kayser

1. Howard called the meeting to order at 5:33 p.m.

2. Additions/deletions to the agenda

Teresa moved to add approval/signing of the Municipal Equipment Loan Fund (MELF) note to the agenda. Howard seconded. All if favor; the motion passed.

3. Approval of the minutes of the and June 10, 2024 Selectboard meetings
    a. May 28, 2024 minutes tabled.

Teresa moved to accept the June 10, 2024 meeting minutes. Howard seconded. All in favor; the motion passed.

4. Selectboard Rules of Procedure
    a. Howard introduced the Selectboard Rules of Procedure.
    b. Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes.
    c. While the Selectboard meeting is open to the public, it is a meeting for the selectboard to conduct Town business.
    d. The Selectboard wants to hear and understand residents' concerns.

5. Adopt Local Hazard Mitigation Plan (LHMP)

Howard moved to accept the LHMP. Teresa seconded. All in favor; the motion passed.

6. Vergennes Area Rescue Squad (VARS) contract renewal

a. Howard reported that a new 5-Town contract will be reviewed at a meeting on Wednesday, June 26. The contract will have the 5 towns as a single entity contracted with VARS.
b. The 24-25 contract was budgeted at $15/capita.
c. The Board signed the contract.

7. Reappraisal grievance status
    a. Maggie reported that 25 grievances were heard/reviewed.
    b. Notices of decision on grievances were mailed om June 21. Those who grieved can appeal the result in writing to the Clerk no later than July 5. BCA has 14 days to schedule a hearing. (July 19.)

8. Town office staffing
    a. Administrative Coordinator
        i. Donna Oliver has started and will be assistant clerk and treasurer, as well as manage some administrative pieces of the lister position, such as processing homestead declarations and current use applications. She is scheduled to work 12 hours/week.
    b. Fund Accounting Specialist
        i. Becky Condon has been contracted to make corrections to align town reporting fully with government accounting practices. Once the needed changes are made, she will do the monthly reconciliation of bank accounts and internal accounting modules.
    c. Clerk vacation July 9-12
        i. Town Hall will have reduced hours that week.
        ii. Teresa requested the hours be published as usual to Front Porch Forum, the Town website, and to the Town's email list.

9. Freepoint/SunEast/Viridis Solar Proposal
    a. This item was added to the agenda at the request of a Panton resident. Since the board didn't have business on this topic, Howard moved on to public comment.

10. Public Comment
    a. Landall Cochran
        i. He is running for district senate seat
        ii. Is a member of the Huntington Selectboard.
        iii. Bills passed by the General Assembly this session prompted him to run.

iv. He is a candidate on the republican ballot.
v. His platform is keeping Vermont affordable.

b. Sharon Ashcraft
    i. Stated corrections to the minutes of the June 10 Selectboard meeting: A comment was attributed to Teresa that was made by Howard and the Town Plan did not come to a public vote.
    ii. She read the Selectboard Handbook with respect to the Municipal Plan (MP):
        1. MP should be a predicter of how a municipality will act.
        2. She would like to trust that Town Plan will be followed.
        3. Citizen participation is Town Plan development is encouraged.
        4. There is no record in the meeting minutes of a solar proposal brought to the Town in 2018.
        5. The March 2024 DRB/PC meeting was first presentation of this proposal
        6. TB—Viridis 2018 versus 2024

c. John Viskup
    i. Asked why residents hadn't heard about this proposal.
    ii. Concerned that if this is built, it will set a precedent to allow large-scale destruction of the bucolic scenery for which Vermont is renown and which draws tourists.
    iii. Asked why the Town would want to do business with a company fined for bribery in Brazil

d. Terry Pelletier
    i. Stated she understands that there is a process for this development that must unfold.
    ii. Asked how the Board will keep people apprised of developments. Concerned that there is a lack of transparency in the process.
    iii. Howard replied that the Town's attorney, Leslie Cadwell, advised that the Town keep its plans/demands "close to the chest," so as not to compromise its position in potential future negotiations. This is why discussions have been in executive session.

e. Jamie Dayton
    i. Expressed concern about the Town's budget
    ii. Encouraged the Board to refrain from salary increases or adding staff until the Town's financial position is known.

f. Kathy Kennett
    i. Asked where and when the Board met with the solar people.
        1. Howard responded that any conversations with the solar representatives were at Selectboard meetings.

ii. Believes Panton property owners should be heard even if they don't live in Panton. She pointed out that the companies making the proposal are out-of-state people.

g. John Viskup
    i. Asked about the hired attorney and the escrow fund to pay the Town's legal expenses and said if the solar company is paying the attorney, the attorney can't be trusted to represent Panton's best interests.
    ii. He questioned when and how the attorney was chosen.
        1. Howard answered that Leslie Cadwell was recommended by Ben Marks, who was the Town's attorney for the Panton Road solar field.
        2. Maggie stated that the hiring of the attorney was documented in the Selectboard agendas and minutes.
    iii. He asked where the Selectboard stands on the proposal.
        1. Teresa answered that the board hasn't had a chance to get together to fully review information and make any determinations.
    iv. Stated that the DRB is supposed to be in charge, and they voted not to change the Town Plan.
    v. Asked if the PUC is "secretly" endorsing this plan.

h. Chris Wyckoff:
    i. Stated the Enhanced Energy Plan designates certain acreage and that the plan shows an area where solar might be located but implies that development would be reviewed.
    ii. Howard stated he has not read the Town Plan, as it was the responsibility and purview of the DRB/PC. Potential changes to the Town Plan could be made by the Selectboard, and they would take guidance from the DRB/PC.

i. Sean Sullivan
    i. Asked if the Selectboard had approved the Enhanced Energy Plan, and if so, why was the Panton Road solar field allowed?
    ii. Howard stated the Panton Road solar field pre-dates the adoption of the Town Plan.
    iii. Asked why the Board would not take a position in support of the DRB/PC decision.
    iv. Teresa reiterated that the board hasn't had a chance to get together to fully review information and make any determinations. And that the Board would include the attorney in their executive session discussions about the proposed development.

j. Reed Wills (FreePoint/SunEast)

i. Thanked the DRB/PC for receiving their presentation in March.
ii. Thanked Town Officials for allowing FreePoint to hold two public meetings at Panton Town Hall.
iii. About 40 people attended the May 22 event.
iv. Fewer than 20 people attended then June 12 event.
v. All info from the June 12open house posted to the Town website.
vi. FreePoint started development in 2018 working with private landowners, then conducted a series of studies for possibility of connecting to existing power grid. The original site was directly on 22A, but feedback requested that the solar field "tucked away." March of 2024 was the first that FreePoint formally shared the proposal with the Town. Shared public input information.

k. Lorraine Kayser
    i. Echoed Terry Pelletier's comment on transparency and stated it is hard to follow the process.
    ii. Noted there was no Zoom option and people feel left on the sidelines.
l. Terry Pelletier
    i. Stated she has a lot of respect for the board members and what it takes to serve for a long time.
    ii. She learned a lot from reading the Town Plan, particularly the Enhanced Energy Plan section, and encouraged the Board members to read it. . Energy part is important. Hopes all three board members will read it.
    iii. The Enhanced Energy Plan gives the Town standing with the PUC.
m. John Viskup
    i. Addressed Reed Wills and said, "Shame on you," for negotiating with the state of Vermont. Stated that [Panton residents] are not a bunch of country bumpkins.
n. Reed Wills, Sean Sullivan, and John Viskup engaged in a back-and-forth regarding FreePoint's process in Panton.
o. Denise Strona
    i. These solar panels will be right in front of her property.
    ii. We're farm people.
    iii. Why would we even consider it?
    iv. Said the development would affect her medically.
p. Teresa Boucher
    i. stated that it is the landowner who was interested in solar development.
    ii. Expressed she is happy to see so many people here, even though it is a tough issue, since most of the time people don't come to the meetings.

q. Chris Wyckoff:
    i. Zoning regulations require screening, and only 20% view in the Zoning regs.
    ii. The DRB/PC said that land-owners were not contacted/consulted when the area for renewable energy was put into the Town Plan.
r. Teresa Boucher
    i. The Board is listening and hearing you.
    ii. We have not had the opportunity to create a position.
    iii. Facts are important.
    iv. We have had three meetings being hammered on. We live here, too. Our public statements are about being SB members before residents.
s. Chris Wyckoff
    i. What were your choices for attorneys and how did you pick the one you have?
    ii. Howard: Former attorney Ben Marks recommended Leslie Cadwell, who lives in Shoreham. There aren't a lot of choices for energy development attorneys.
t. Sharon:
    i. 51 acres of proposed development inside the plan, the rest is outside the plan. Will be visible to everyone.
    ii. Distance for the transmission line is 5. 8. Five miles is the limit. May 22 meeting wasn't question and answer. On May 22,people asked for the June 12 meeting date to be changed.
u. Chuck Strona
    i. came from CA vacation. CA has a similar situation; residents don't want something to happen but board has dug in their feet. If Board is not carrying out the will of the people, they should resign.
    ii. Howard asked if he was asking the Board to resign.
        1. Chuck answered no.
v. Kathy Kennett:
    i. Recommend that Board go to the Town's website and review the solar information and have a large map made for display.
    ii. Teresa agreed that having a large map made was a good idea.
    iii. Reed Wills said FreePoint would have maps made and brought to Town Hall later this week.

11. Communications
    a. GMP Vergennes Hydro project
    b. Boundaries scope of work for next SB meeting
    c. Calkins networks quote for Zoom laptop memory upgrade.

12. Review/approval of accounts payable warrant, timesheets & payroll warrant

Howard moved to accept the warrants and timesheets. Teresa seconded. All in favor; the motion passed.

13. Executive session to discuss FY24 audit and annual staff performance reviews

Howard moved to enter executive session. Teresa seconded. All in favor; the Board entered executive session at 7:31 p.m.

Teresa moved to exit executive session. Howard seconded. All in favor; the Board returned to open session at 7:28 p.m.

- Teresa moved to retain Telling & Hillman for the FY24 audit. Howard seconded. All in favor; the motion passed.
- Teresa moved to table staff wage increases. Howard seconded. All in favor; the motion passed.

14. Adjournment

Teresa moved to adjourn. Howard seconded. All in favor; the meeting was adjourned at 7:39 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Maggie McCormick
Town Clerk & Treasurer