



Town of Bellingham

BOARD OF SELECTMEN

10 Mechanic Street

Bellingham, Massachusetts 02019

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March 18, 2024

The Selectboard meeting was called to order at 7:00 PM in the Arcand Meeting Room by Chairman Michael Connor. Actively participating in the meeting were the following Board members: Mr. Connor, Mr. Sahin, Mr. Hennessy and Ms. Odabashian. Also actively participating in the meeting was Interim Town Administrator Denis Fraine and Administrative Assistant Hilarie Allie. This meeting was accessible to the public either in-person, via the Zoom online option or ABMI Cable TV.

Public Hearing – Larry Sposato, Town Clerk, will discuss Local Election requirements pursuant to Chapter 92 of the Acts of 2022 (Votes Act) and whether the Town will vote to opt out of certain non-mandatory features such as Voting-by-Mail and In-Person Early voting for annual municipal elections.

Mr. Connor opened the public hearing, and, on an Odabashian/Sahin motion, the Board unanimously voted 4-0 to move the public hearing until after the next two agenda items.

Fire Department Pinning Ceremony

Fire Chief Miller explained he would be recognizing three new Firefighters within the department. Chief Miller introduced Timothy Cole who started with the department in January of 2024 as a transfer from another Town, Corey Lemon who was once with the department previously and came back and Ben Butensky who came to the department as a medic and recently graduated from the academy. Friends and family gathered to witness the pinning and celebrated with applause and pictures. Representative Soter presented Ben Butensky with a citation for graduating from the MA Firefighting Academy.

Citizens Input

Mr. Steve Goyette presented to the Board a citizen's petition to put a stop to the construction of warehouses in Town. With this petition and 200 certified signatures he formally requested a Special Town Meeting. Mr. Fraine stated the Board must act on this no later than 45 days.

On an Odabashian/Hennessy motion the Board set a date for the Special Town Meeting to hear the petition for Wednesday May 1st at 7:30PM in the High School Auditorium.

Public Hearing Continued

Larry Sposato, Town Clerk, presented before the Board to discuss the "Voter Law" (Chapter 54, §25B) which provides for municipal options regarding the manner in which residents vote in local elections. The choices given to local authorities are whether voting by mail and/or in-person early voting will be allowed. He stated if either early voting or vote-by-mail are adopted, the Town would absorb the cost of each process. Mr. Sposato stated he had already received 2100 requests for ballots for all upcoming elections from the cards that were sent out by the state and if the Board decides to opt out of mail in

ballots for the local Town election these residents would not receive a ballot. Ms. Odabashian stated she feels strongly that residents should be given the option to request a ballot and vote by mail whether it be a state or local election and stated it would be a mistake otherwise. She does not feel it is necessary however to have in person early voting. Mr. Sposato stated that registered voters still and always have the option of absentee ballots should they require the need to vote by mail.

Ms. Joyce Notine of 24 Chamberlain Road stated she is deeply concerned with the limited access to voting options that residents have in local elections and stated it was her belief that the Board in general was not interested in expanding voting options. She stated all surrounding towns offer mail in ballots and didn't believe the Board followed the correct procedure in June at the special Town election. Ms. Notine also expressed concerns with handicap accessibility at the election site and questioned if they met ADA requirements. Mr. Fraine stated that he along with Mr. Sposato and the management team at the DPW had met about this very topic and these issues will be rectified going forward.

Mr. Ed Featherston of 54 Laurel Lane stated he would like to see the Board offer mail in ballots due to his fluctuating work schedule and stated it would also help increase participation in local elections.

Mr. Don Martinis of 334 Maple Street expressed concern with the integrity of mail in ballots as well as a distrust in the postal service.

Mr. Ken Hamwey of 39 Wethersfield Road stated he does not believe the Town should offer mail in ballots or early voting.

Rep Soter stated the legislation granted these options to towns based on the different time tables offered at the state and federal levels.

Mr. Hennessy stated he felt more comfortable with just offering absentee ballots due to the smaller number of them being requested.

Mr. Sposato briefly discussed voter registration and his office's procedure of receiving mail in ballots.

On an Odabashian/Hennessy motion the Board unanimously voted 4-0 to close the Public Hearing.

On an Odabashian/Hennessy motion the Board unanimously voted 4-0 to not conduct early in person voting for the Municipal Town Election set for Tuesday June 4, 2024.

Ms. Odabashian made a motion to conduct voting by mail prior to the Municipal Town Election set for Tuesday June 4, 2024. This motion was not seconded and therefore no vote was taken.

On a Hennessy/Connor motion the Board voted 3 in favor with Ms. Odabashian opposing to not offer voting by mail prior to the Municipal Town Election set for Tuesday June 4, 2024.

On an Odabashian/Sahin motion the Board unanimously voted 4-0 to hold polling hours from 7AM to 8PM on Tuesday June 4, 2024 at the Bellingham High School Gymnasium for the Municipal Town Election.

On an Odabashian/Sahin motion the Board unanimously voted 4-0 to allow for police presence at the Municipal Town Election set for Tuesday June 4, 2024.

Budget Shortfall Discussion

Mr. Fraine explained that the Board had been presented the Fire Department's FY25 Budget and they proposed a paramedic only program which would employ six new paramedic only members to the Fire Department. Unfortunately, the Town's tax levy and new growth numbers do not support adding six new members to the department. He stated if the Board wanted to fund this program, the only way to do so would be to cut money from other budgets or present an override to the residents. Fire Chief Miller explained that the volume of calls has increased 38% over the last ten years with no additional staff. Mr. Fraine explained the total cost of funding this, including direct and indirect costs, would be approximately \$750,000. The ultimate cost to the residents would be roughly \$76 per year based on the tax bill of an average single family home. Mr. Connor explained the role of the Select Board is not to vote for the override but instead vote to put the decision in the hands of the residents by way of a ballot question in the June election.

On an Odabashian/Sahin motion the Board unanimously voted 4-0 to bring forward to the voters of Bellingham the question of an override at the June election for \$750,000 to hire six paramedics for the newly proposed paramedic program within the Fire Department.

Senior Tax Work Off Discussion

Mr. Connor stated as a result of the pending override he would like the Board to authorize an increase in the wages being earned by the individuals participating in the Senior Tax Work Off Program. Currently the program is budgeted with a cap of \$150,000 and \$20,000 of that went unused this past year. Raising the wages from \$15 to \$17 an hour would more than double the cost of an override for those who took advantage of working the maximum 100 hours.

On an Odabashian/Hennessy motion the Board unanimously voted 4-0 to increase the hourly rate from \$15 to \$17 an hour there increasing the cap earned from \$1,500 to \$1,700 effective December 1, 2024.

Recommendation to Appoint Town Planner/Engineer

On an Odabashian/Hennessy motion the Board unanimously voted 4-0 to appoint Rob Lussier as the Director of Planning & Engineering. Under discussion, Mr. Fraine stated Mr. Lussier has the perfect background for this position with an expertise in peer reviews. He currently serves as the associate member on the Planning Board and is the chairman of the MBTA Community Committee. The Board members had nothing but good things to say about Mr. Lussier and said he would make a wonderful addition to the Town and the Planning Department.

Minutes

On a Hennessy/Sahin motion the Board unanimously voted 4-0 to approve the February 24th and March 4th minutes as submitted.

Old Business

Mr. Connor stated he was asked about other cleanup activities scheduled besides Earth Day. Mr. Fraine stated he met with the management team at the DPW and their goal is

to begin cleanup initiatives in late spring/early summer when the additional parks workers come on board. They will dedicate one street once a week to focus on cleaning and they will have supervision and all the proper equipment.

Mr. Connor asked about the new light at the corner of Center Street and South Main Street and Mr. Riedle, DPW Director, stated adjustments had been made but he was unsure if they had completed the final walk through.

Town Administrator Report

Mr. Fraine stated the Bid Award for the North Main Street mill and paving project came in at about half of what they were expecting and Mr. Riedle would be joining a meeting in April to discuss that along with the other paving projects planned for the summer. Mr. Hennessy asked Mr. Riedle about Box Pond Road and Mr. Riedle stated the Road Committee will be discussing Box Pond Road as well as the other streets in Town that are in need of immediate attention. The committee will be putting together a list of the 100 worst roads in Town and will begin prioritizing the repairs.

On an Odabashian/Sahin motion, the Board unanimously voted 4-0 to adjourn the meeting at 8:35 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Hilarie J. Allie".

Hilarie J. Allie
Administrative Assistant