

**TOWN OF ROCKINGHAM
BELLOWS FALLS VILLAGE CORPORATION
Merger Committee Regular Meeting
(Rockingham Selectboard & Bellows Falls Village Trustees)
Tuesday, January 26, 2016**

Present: Ann DiBernardo, Stefan Golec, Joshua Hearne, Colin James, Evelyn Weeks, Sanford Martin, Peter Golec, Thomas MacPhee

Absent: Susan Hammond, Nancy McAuliffe

Also Present: Kristi Morris, Facilitator; Willis Stearns, II, Municipal Manager; Kerry Bennett, Recording Clerk; Deborah Wright; Wade Masure

Press: Joey Powers, FACT8; Joel Slutsky, The Shopper

Call to Order: Meeting was called to order at 6:00 p.m. by Facilitator Kristi Morris. Morris read significant sections from the Rules of Procedure.

Additions to the Agenda for Routine Administrative Matters and/or Pressing Matters that will require ratification at a future meeting: None

Approve Minutes of November 24, 2015: *Colin James made the motion to approve the minutes of November 24, 2015 as printed. Motion was seconded by Peter Golec. Motion passed unanimously.*

Public Comment on Items Not on the Agenda (3 minutes per person):

- Deborah Wright read sections of the Rockingham Town Plan – Chapter 5 that she felt were significant points that the committee should be aware of.

Agenda:

1. Plan of Merger Document – continue discussion: *Evelyn Weeks made the motion that the Committee send the document included in the packet and titled “Plan of Merger” back to the two boards for review. Motion was seconded by Peter Golec. Weeks explained that she felt this should now move forward so the two boards can take action. James felt the financials should be discussed. Stefan Golec felt the motion was premature and the financials should be discussed. Morris stated that if the committee were to approve this motion the next item on the agenda was the financial discussion. Peter Golec felt the committee should discuss both plans further. Morris asked Weeks if the current Plan of Merger was the document she intended to go back to the boards. Weeks stated that it was. Martin stated that he also felt it a good thing to discuss the financials but also noted that the Town & Village were 2 very close entities and did not feel it necessary to go into depth. Martin also noted that this is not like a corporate merger where there are stakeholders and there should be no expectation of any monetary payout. Hearne also felt that the town-wide police & fire has an unknown impact on the budgets. Wright stated that the committee has not accepted this plan as the plan to go forward. Stearns noted that the motion on the table now would be an acceptance of the “Plan of Merger”.*

Morris called for a vote on the motion. The vote was 4 in favor and 4 opposed. Motion failed.

Morris stated he would continue with the Plan of Merger where the committee left off in November.

Fire Department: Morris read this section in its entirety. Stearns noted that at the last meeting the committee amended the rules to allow public comment during the reading of each section. Morris asked the committee if they had any objection to this. DiBernardo stated that she felt that public input should wait until the public meetings. The remainder of the Committee did not have any objection.

Joshua Hearne made the motion that the three fire departments – Rockingham, Bellows Falls and Saxtons River, remain as in their current districts and funded through their current budget process. Motion was seconded by Colin James.

Stearns reminded those present that the Rockingham Volunteer Fire Department is funded town-wide through Rockingham taxes; Saxtons River is funded through the Saxtons River Village Grand List but covers one half of the Town of Rockingham; Bellows Falls is funded by the Bellows Falls Grand List budget. Stearns noted that presently it is OK for Bellows Falls and Saxtons River taxpayers to pay for the Rockingham Fire Department but not vice versa. Stearns also stated that by merging assets can be eliminated. Major apparatus is now funded by the Town of Rockingham for all 3 departments.

Joshua Hearne made the motion to amend the previous motion to keep the districts but that the Bellows Falls Fire Department personnel and benefits remain with the Bellows Falls taxpayers. Amendment was seconded by Colin James.

Stefan Golec stated that he felt this was not fair, that he as a Bellows Falls taxpayer was paying for Rockingham but Rockingham was not paying for Bellows Falls even though Bellows Falls was most likely the first responder to an incident in Rockingham. MacPhee also noted that the Bellows Falls Fire Department not only responds to Rockingham but is also the first responder to many town buildings such as the Town Hall, the Rockingham schools, etc. Stefan Golec again stated that this was not in the best interest of the Bellows Falls Village. Wade Masure asked what the 911 district was for Bellows Falls. Stearns stated that it was the actual 1.4 square miles of the Bellows Falls Village. Wright stated that she felt the costs should be spread throughout the Town and thought that the intent of the document was to have all pay for all. DiBernardo stated that she felt this was all about efficiency.

Morris called for a vote on the amendment. The motion to amend was defeated with 2 affirmative votes and 6 no votes.

Hearne stated at this time he would rescind his original motion and James rescinded his second to that motion.

Finances: Morris read this section in its entirety. Stefan Golec noted that the Bellows Falls Village currently has an unrestricted fund balance of \$231,000 and does not feel this should be given away. Stearns stated that this number is transitional and would change from year to year.

Water and Wastewater Departments: Morris read this section in its entirety. Wright noted that the minutes from the November 24, 2015 meeting stated that the “Plan of Merger” language was taken primary from the Bradford and Essex documents. However, Wright noted that those towns had water and wastewater commissioners and there is no language in this document for commissioners. Stearns stated that the Bradford commissioners had set up their own set of books, their own checkbook and paid their own bills. This was in violation of the law and they are now an advisory board only. Stearns stated that the Selectboard is the only fiducially responsible board that can discharge funds from accounts by warrant. Stearns stated that this language was intentionally not included in the proposed document.

Ordinances, Rules & Regulations: Morris read this section in its entirety. Hearne asked that until such rules, by-laws or regulations be lawfully amended or repealed that these are restricted to the areas that they currently encompass. Stearns stated that they are currently written that way and one of the first things would be to look where there is a conflict and amend or repeal at that time.

Selectboard: Morris read this section in its entirety. There was no discussion on this section.

Votes Required: Morris read this section in its entirety. No discussion.

Applicability of general law: Morris read this section in its entirety. No discussion.

Special districts: Morris read this section in its entirety. No discussion.

Severability: Morris read this section in its entirety. No discussion.

2. Financial Information – continue discussion: Stearns noted that all requested material for both Town & Village was included in the packets as well as being posted on the website. Stearns referred back to Stefan Golec’s question about the fund balance. Stearns stated that the unrestricted fund balance would be used to pay off any Village debt in general government. The Water and Wastewater debt remains with those enterprise funds and is paid by user fees. Stearns then went over the increase and decrease in taxation should the merger pass with current numbers noting that the Bellows Falls Village taxes would go from \$1.61 per hundred dollars of value to \$1.31 per hundred dollars of value. Town of Rockingham would go from \$0.94 to \$1.31. This would include police and fire services throughout the town.

James asked if Stearns could forecast increased costs. Morris noted that any budget increases would have to be voted on by the registered voters.

DiBernardo asked if it was possible to do a partial merger with just the fire departments. Stearns noted that the only thing left in the Bellows Falls Village Charter that has not already been taken over by the Town is the fire and police and that all other services such as roads, signage, lighting, sidewalks, fire equipment is being paid for with town tax dollars.

DiBernardo asked Stearns how much an increase this would be on a \$100,000 home. Stearns stated that it would be about \$360 for an increase for those outside of Bellows Falls, and an approximately \$300 decrease for those in Bellows Falls Village. Martin stated that he feels it is time to let the voters decide if the \$360 increase per year for police and fire services is worth it or not.

Thomas MacPhee made the motion that the Committee approves the “Plan of Merger” document as presented and send this document back to the Rockingham Selectboard and Bellows Falls Village Trustees. Motion was seconded by Ann DiBernardo. Morris reminded the committee members that once the Board has approved a document that 2 public hearings are required each according to State statute. Wright asked what would happen if the two boards changed the language. Morris felt it would most likely have to return to the committee.

Morris called for a vote on the motion. The motion passed with 6 in favor of the motion and 2 opposed.

Set Agenda Items for February 23, 2016: Morris stated that setting an agenda was now not necessary. Stearns suggested that this committee make a motion to allow the Village President and the Selectboard Chair to set an agenda should it be necessary to come back to the committee.

Thomas MacPhee made the motion that should it be necessary for the Plan of Merger to come back to the Merger Committee that the Bellows Falls Village President and the Rockingham Selectboard Chair set the agenda for that meeting. Motion was seconded by Evelyn Weeks. Motion passed unanimously.

MacPhee stated that on behalf of the Committee he would like to thank Morris for agreeing to facilitate these meetings. Morris in turn thanked the Committee and the residents of Rockingham and Bellows Falls for asking him and was happy to be of service.

Other Business: None

Adjourn: *Peter Golec made the motion to adjourn the meeting at 7:40 p.m. Motion was seconded by Sanford Martin. Motion passed unanimously.*

Attest: _____

Kerry Bennett, Recording Clerk