

SHARON SELECTBOARD
Australian Ballot Information Meeting
Town Meeting 2021
Monday, May 3, 2021 6:30PM

MINUTES (Final)

PARTICIPANTS and LISTENERS: 44

Selectboard Members Chair Joe Ronan, Vice Chair Kevin Gish, Clerk Mary Gavin; Town Staff Margy Becker, SB Assistant; Deb Jones Finance Manager, Frank Rogers (Road Foreman via phone); Zoom administrators residents Lucy Gibson, Greg DeFrancis, and Margy Becker (staff).

The meeting recording began at 6:28PM. Joe Ronan convened the meeting at 6:30PM.

Introductory Remarks

Joe Ronan welcomed participants in brief remarks which addressed the new and temporary format for Town Meeting 2021, which includes voting by Australian Ballot on all town meeting business.

Greg DeFrancis presented a Zoom tutorial to instruct people participating via phone and computer how to unmute themselves and raise hands.

Joe Ronan read ARTICLE 1:

Article 1. To elect the following Town Officers:	Candidate(s) Filed:
Town Moderator for 1 year term:	Galen Mudgett, Jr.
Town Clerk for a 3 year term:	Catherine Sartor
Collector of Delinquent Taxes for 1 year term:	Ken Wright
Selectboard for 3 year term:	Mary Gavin
Lister for 3 year term:	Galen Mudgett, Jr.
1st Constable for a 1 year term:	no candidate filed
Trustee of Public Funds – 3 year term:	Phyllis Potter
Trustee of Public Funds – 1 year remaining in 3 year term:	Mary Ayer
Trustee of Baxter Library – 3 year term:	Kit Hood
Trustee of Chester Downer Fund – 3 year term:	Jim Kearns

Cathy Sartor introduced herself and spoke briefly of her professional experience and interest in serving as our next town clerk. She and her husband live on Fay Brook Road. She has a background in retail and has also worked for the State of Vermont.

Mary Gavin read ARTICLE 2.

Shall the voters of the Town of Sharon appropriate the amount of \$1,688,743 for necessary Town expenses, including highways, of which \$1,266,569 shall be raised by property taxes?

Mary indicated the Town is ending the current FY21 fiscal year better than anticipated, thanks to efforts of town staff. The general fund may end up \$42,950 under budget, and the highway fund may finish \$56,415 under budget.

The Selectboard made the decision to not increase the amount to be raised in property taxes for FY22 and to apply a portion of the fund balance (accumulated surpluses) to offset expenses. \$24,828 of the general fund fund balance will be applied to the FY22 budget; \$34,536 of the highway fund fund balance will be applied to the FY22 budget.

The proposed general fund and highway budgets include a 2% wage increase for employees and an increased employer share of health insurance expense. The highway budget reflects the need to begin to address the deteriorating condition of the town garage.

There were no questions or concerns expressed about the budget article.

Mary Gavin read ARTICLE 3.

Shall the voters of the Town of Sharon authorize the Town Treasurer to collect General Fund, Highway Fund, and School District current taxes on real and personal estate?

There were no public comments.

Kevin Gish read ARTICLE 4.

Shall the voters of the Town of Sharon authorize payment of real and personal property taxes in two (2) installments for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022 the first being on or before Wednesday, September 15, 2021 and the second being on or before Wednesday, February 16, 2022?

There were no public comments.

Kevin Gish read ARTICLE 5.

Shall the voters of the Town of Sharon vote that overdue taxes shall bear an interest rate of one percent (1%) per month or part thereof for each installment until paid in full, and a late fee of eight percent (8%) following any delinquency after the second installment due date?

Kevin Gish indicated the interest rate to be charged on late and delinquent taxes is less than in prior years. In prior years it had been "1% per month or part thereof for the first three months

and 1.5% thereafter for each installment until paid in full". There were no public comments or questions.

Kevin Gish read ARTICLE 6.

Shall the voters direct the Sharon Selectboard to acquire from the Alliance for Vermont Communities approximately 149.7 acres of land (Sharon land parcel number R1758S2), contingent upon the Selectboard's subsequent agreement:

- **on the terms of a conservation easement for the property;**
- **on the terms of an agreement for the acquisition of the property; and**
- **on other terms relating to future management of the property with the Town of Strafford (owner of an adjacent land parcel in Strafford), the Alliance of Vermont Communities, and the Vermont Land Trust and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board?**

Kevin Gish indicated the initial plan was to have single ownership of the Ashley Forest parcel, but now each town will own their separate parcels. There will be an inter-local agreement to be worked out between the selectboards for management of the forest. The inter-local agreement will address maintenance, forestry, finance, recreation, etc. Strafford voters approved the Ashley Community Forest article 399 -70. The county foresters will provide forest management services for town forests for free. The existing fields are being mowed for a cost of \$450 per year. The loss in property tax dollars is equivalent to less than \$1.00 per person per year. Towns can choose to invest more dollars into the Forest if they choose. The towns will not be required to do so.

Matthew Perry, resident on Fay Brook Road and professional arborist, described how he came to be involved with volunteering to maintain the Ashley Forest and that he has enjoyed 'building a community' with other volunteers from the area. He encouraged people to vote for passage of the article, saying the Ashley Forest has tremendous potential for the community.

Lucy Gibson, resident, indicated she serves on the Board for the Upper Valley Trails Alliance which has been supportive of trail development in the Ashley Forest. She noted many of the trails used by the public in Sharon are on private land. Private landowners may close off access to trails at any time, which has recently happened in Strafford involving a trail with beautiful views. She indicated community ownership of trails will become increasingly important.

Joe Ronan explained he thinks all arguments in favor of the Ashley Forest project are good arguments, but they are not necessarily good arguments for town ownership of the parcel. He suggests alternative structures for ownership should be looked at.

Donna Foster, resident and staff to VT Land Trust, indicated she is excited at the opportunity for the Ashley Forest project presents to the communities. She disputes claims that are lots of

places in Sharon to recreate with guaranteed public access. The Ashley Forest would be a huge gift to the Town, and it would be sad to pass up on this opportunity.

Laura Tatro, resident, stated the Town already hosts Downer State Forest and other protected forest lands. She is concerned that acquisition of another forest property would benefit only a few and not the masses. She is concerned that taking the Ashley Forest off the tax rolls would present a financial hardship to many. Raising taxes to the tune of \$1 per person can be a burden, and taxes could increase more down the road. She is concerned about the costs to the Town of managing the forest in the future.

Erik Skarsten has lived on Fay Brook Road for the past four (4) years. His property is near the Ashley Forest parcel, and he invited residents to come join him for walks on trails that already exist. He spoke of the Ashley Forest parcel as a different and special place.

Kit Hood, resident, views the Ashley Forest as a worthwhile investment for the Town. The Forest might contribute some income to the towns in the future. This is a 'once in a lifetime opportunity'. There is a donation of \$20,000 to tide us over for forest management.

Suzanne Long (Royalton), who is Treasurer for Alliance for VT Communities, asked for and was granted permission to speak. She indicated the Ashley Forest parcel is currently in Current Use and the property tax loss to Sharon would be approximately \$500 per year.

Debbie St. Peter, retiring Sharon Town Clerk and life-long Vermonter, noted a recent unsuccessful attempt to find the Strafford access to the Ashley Forest parcel from Nutting Lane. Signage was poor and there is minimal parking. County Forester David Paganelli explained Nutting Road is a class 3 road, and he clarified directions to access the Ashley Forest property from the end of Nutting Road.

Debbie St. Peter inquired about access to the Sharon parcel. Donna Foster and Mr. Paganelli confirmed there is no deeded access for recreation purposes to the Sharon parcel from Clifford Farm Road. At one point a Fisk family member granted a right-of-way across their land for timber harvesting only. This was back when the land was partially open. Mr. Paganelli does not suggest the public attempt to access the Sharon parcel via this right-of-way unless they have obtained permission from Deborah Fisk.

Debbie St. Peter asked for details of the conservation easement and 'terms of acquisition' as mentioned in the Article. Kevin Gish noted the terms of the conservation easement and terms of acquisition would be laid out in the inter-local agreement under discussion with Strafford.

Debbie St. Peter agrees it would be nice for the public to have access to this beautiful piece of land, but she is very concerned the voters do not yet know many details about how this project will play out. There may be legal expenses incurred to assure access from Sharon. She noted increasing real estate prices and that Vermont natives are being priced out of the housing market. She expressed support for identifying a different entity to take ownership of the land.

She thinks the project is moving too quickly during COVID19 times and that the Alliance for VT Communities had been somewhat forceful about the Town holding the vote sooner than later because of concerns over finances.

David Indenbaum noted he is not in favor of passage of this article. He stated it was unclear to him why the Alliance for VT Communities (AVC) wants to *give* the Town the land. Why could not the AVC keep the land and continue to make the land available to the public? He indicated the AVC has the \$20,000 to help with management of the property. Dr. Indenbaum also expressed concern over property tax increases.

Michael Sacca, Alliance for VT Communities (AVC) and resident of Tunbridge asked for and was granted permission to speak. Public outings on the property have been hosted since 2019 by the AVC, and have been well-attended. The AVC members feel the people of the region paid for the land, thus the AVC would like to give the land to the people. The AVC does not own land. The property is a great natural resource for the towns and would be so for generations to come. He clarified the management committee would be comprised of 2 town representatives from each town plus 1 additional member (with related professional expertise) for a total of 5 members.

Mr. Sacca further explained the State supports purchase of the property by the towns. The \$150,000 grant from the VT Housing & Conservation Board will be used to pay off the loan from the VT Land Trust to the AVC used to purchase the land. The clock is ticking on this grant. He noted the Sharon Town Plan discusses the importance of wildlife corridors. The Ashley Forest project complies with the Plan and that both the Sharon Planning Commission and Conservation Commission have expressed support for the Ashley Forest project.

Jenn Hayslett, member of AVC and Tunbridge resident asked for and was granted permission to speak. She is Treasurer for the AVC. She pointed out two-town ownership of the forest presents a special chance to collaborate. She stated she hopes the residents of Sharon would want the property. If the Town of Sharon does not accept the property, the AVC will have to figure out what to do.

David Indenbaum said he understood the AVC may not be in the business of owning land but neither is the Town of Sharon. Not every gift is what it is made out to be.

Greg DeFrancis noted the contiguous lands in Ashely Forest would serve as an important wildlife corridor. He further noted that residents currently enjoy the use of the trails on the Swett Property, yet the Swetts could close access to their property at any time. Greg indicated he sees a lot of value for the Town in the Ashley Forest project and encouraged people to vote yes on the article.

Dee Gish, resident and staff of VT Land Trust, spoke of multiple national crises facing the nation including climate change. She indicated it was time to think 'out of the box' and to come together for the common good. She said she 'hears' and understands the valid concerns

regarding the project. In closing she stated the town is being presented with a rare opportunity to act for the common good and expressed support for the article.

Tributes and Recognitions:

Joe Ronan paid tribute to retiring Town Clerk Debbie St. Peter. Town staff Deb Jones displayed a cribbage board in the shape of the State of Vermont to be presented to Debbie in honor of the tradition of playing cribbage during elections. Joe Ronan also thanked Judi Kehoe, Assistant Town Clerk for her service.

Joe Ronan noted the loss of several residents over the past year including Brad Atwood, Emma Rikert, and Bob Rogers who had served the Town in various capacities. Emma Rikert has served most recently as a Trustee of Public Funds.

Kevin Gish presented the tribute to Brad Atwood, former neighbor, Selectboard member, and member of various area non-profit entities. He noted Brad's leadership in the days after Tropical Storm Irene.

Mary Gavin presented the tribute to Bob Rogers, who had been a long-time member of Sharon Fire Department, former CRELL employee, and a person who was always willing to help.

Kevin Gish paid tribute to Peter Andersen whose expertise and level-headed demeanor was of great value to the Sharon Planning Commission over many years. Peter has since moved to Royalton and retired from the Planning Commission.

Galen Mudgett reminded participants of the second School District informational hearing scheduled for Thursday, 6PM May 6th.

Mary Gavin made the motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:20PM. Kevin Gish seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

Submitted by Margy Becker