

Town of Plainfield Select Board Special Meeting
October 21, 2024
18 High St., Plainfield, VT and Via Zoom
Minutes - Draft

Agenda:

- Call Meeting to Order
- Changes to Agenda
- Announcements
- Welcome and Introductions: Karl Bissex
- Discuss the purpose and benefits of a recovery planning process: Jordan Gamez (FEMA), Jessica Savage (Vermont Council on Rural Development - VCRD), and Sam Young (State Interagency Recovery Coordination Group)
- Propose a collaborative process: Jessica Savage
- Offer support and expertise: Pat Moulton (State of Vermont Flood Recovery Officer) and/or Jordan Gamez
- Discuss and public comment on municipality/community expectations
- Establish next steps: Select Board , Jessica Savage, and Pat Moulton
- Discussion and Approval of contract with The Integrity Group to assist with FEMA applications
- Discussion of use of ARPA Funds to support General Fund
- Authorization of State agreement regarding rental of Mill St. temporary bridge
- Appointment of Josh Pitts as Town Treasurer for 1 year term
- Adjourn

Present: Select Board members Karl Bissex (Chair), Patti Jamele, Dan Fingas, Frances Rose Subbiondo, and Peter Youngbaer. Also present were Emergency Management Director and Hazard Mitigation Committee member Michael Billingsley, Jessica Savage of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, Jordan Gamez from FEMA, Plainfield Emergency Management FEMA Buyout Coordinator and member of the Village Expansion Steering Committee Arion Thiboumery, Town Grants Administrator Karen Hatcher, State of Vermont Flood Recovery Officer Pat Moulton, Laura Cavin Bailey of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, Jamie Spector of the Plainfield Recreation and Public Arts Committee, Paula Emery, Dawn Fancher, Rae Carter, North Montpelier resident Selena Barton, Lloyd Farnham, Executive Vice President of The Integrity Group David Gillespie, Olivia Schmidt of The Integrity Group, Plainfield

Delinquent Tax Collector and ARPA Committee member George Cushing, John Harrison, Annie Coughlin, and Charlie Cogbill.

Call Meeting to Order:

Select Board Chair Karl Bissex called the meeting to order at 7:00pm.

Changes to Agenda:

Dan Fingas announced changes to the speakers scheduled for the meeting, noting that Sam Young of the State Interagency Recovery Coordination Group was unable to attend and the “Propose a collaborative process” agenda item would be presented by Laura Cavin Bailey and Jessica Savage from the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD). State of Vermont Flood Recovery Officer Pat Moulton shared that Sam Young is no longer working with FEMA.

Announcements:

Bissex stated the Select Board had received correspondence from a citizen regarding Select Board minutes. He explained the Select Board is addressing the issue of the need for minutes to be posted in a timely manner and exploring use of AI voice-to-text applications to assist with draft minutes.

Bissex welcomed new Select Board member Peter Youngbaer noting this is the first time the Plainfield Select Board has had five seats filled. He shared that all five members have been on the Board no longer than seven months. Fingas shared that the Select Board does also post recordings of their meetings when available.

Bissex shared that the Town is operating on a tight schedule for addressing flood recovery issues with a meeting scheduled with FEMA in the coming weeks.

Bissex recognized Emergency Management Director Michael Billingsley who shared that the deadline for applying for FEMA Individual Assistance and Small Business Administration assistance has been extended to November 25, 2024 which includes damage to driveways and bridges. He also shared that Efficiency Vermont has a generous rebate system for heating systems for flood affected households.

Welcome and Introductions - Karl Bissex:

Bissex welcomed Jessica Savage of the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD).

Discuss the purpose and benefits of a recovery planning process - Jordan Gamez (FEMA), Jessica Savage (Vermont Council on Rural Development - VCRD), and Sam Young (State Interagency Recovery Coordination Group):

Sam Young was unable to attend this meeting.

Jessica Savage shared that VCRD has had requests for assistance with facilitation of community engagement in recovery processes. She described the work of VCRD, sharing that they are a nonpartisan nonprofit that provides neutral facilitation and convening services for communities at little or no financial cost to the community.

Jordan Gamez from FEMA Community Assistance explained the assistance with planning available to the local government based on community needs. They explained that a recovery plan is a document created by the community to assist in recovery, identifying gaps and needs, potential projects, identifying funding opportunities, and bringing in partners and stakeholders. They highlighted the benefits of a recovery plan for targeting funding sources and helping the Town prepare to take advantage of those resources.

Billingsley explained that there are currently three Town groups working on flood recovery: the Select Board, the Grants Administration Team, and the Village Expansion Steering Committee.

Arion Thiboumery, member of the Village Expansion Steering Committee, described the work of the committee.

Karen Hatcher, Town Grants Administrator and member of the Grants Administration Team, described the recovery planning process as an opportunity to envision the kind of future we want for our Town including planning for recreation, businesses, and community services.

State of Vermont Flood Recovery Officer Pat Moulton of the Vermont Agency of Administration explained the ways in which they can be a resource for the Town. They shared that VCRD has a long record of helping community voices be heard in community development and flood recovery. They explained that FEMA has a long term recovery plan process and also looks at the projects that need to be done, identifying timelines that allow for accountability. They explained that local people lead the efforts from the early stages of planning to the longer years of implementation. They also discussed support for identifying funding sources.

Laura Cavin Bailey of VCRD explained that they are already supporting other communities with flood recovery that is customized to the needs of the community.

Propose a collaborative process - Jessica Savage:

Cavin Bailey explained that a planning committee can bridge the municipality and community efforts already underway and can provide cohesion to help with implementation. They explained that 4-6 weeks after the planning committee is formed a community forum is held to get public input and generate ideas, look at grouped themes, and prioritize the process to address the most urgent needs first. They said that following this projects are kicked off with State and regional partners as resources helping to identify funding sources.

Offer support and expertise - Pat Moulton (State of Vermont Flood Recovery Officer) and/or Jordan Gamez:

See above from Pat Moulton.

Discuss and public comment on municipality/community expectations:

Cavin Bailey raised the question of whether this is the process the Town needs.

Hatcher stated their opinion that it is important to have more of the community involved in the planning process explaining that decisions about how funds will be used and the broader vision for Plainfield should be made with input from the public.

Jamie Spector, of the Plainfield Recreation and Public Arts Committee, shared their positive experience being involved with VCRD in the past in terms of support in community conversation but noted also the need for those conversations to lead to concrete projects. They noted that there is a need for human capital and capital in addition to community conversations. They shared their belief that the Town needs technical support for identifying funding sources and help with the process of applying for funding.

Paula Emery presented a process question asking who votes on whether the Town works with VCRD on the process planning. Bissex explained that the Select Board is seeking input from the community. Fingas stated that if the Town chooses to work with VCRD the Select Board needs to take action to invite them in to begin the process. Emery also noted that the recreation field has changed dramatically since the flood.

Dawn Fancher expressed their hope for more process planning and more communication that will engage the whole community and stated their particular interest in the Great Brook, Brook Rd., and the future conversation about infrastructure.

Billingsley described the fast, focused, and successful recovery efforts already underway and expressed his interest in improved, coordinated communication and reinforcing the work being done.

Rae Carter spoke of the ongoing need for volunteers and questioned whether there is an option for paying for people's assistance to increase participation and provide more inclusivity. They expressed agreement with the need for communication.

Thiboumery commented that the Town has a strong Select Board and great staff and noted there is a clear set of problems that need to be addressed including roads, infrastructure, and housing. They stated their belief that the Town would benefit from assistance in how to accomplish the needed recovery actions.

North Montpelier resident Selena Barton pointed out that Goddard provides an opportunity to coordinate efforts across towns including North Montpelier, East Montpelier, Marshfield, and Plainfield. They stated that young people want to be part of the discussion and asked if there are tools to engage them.

Youngbaer expressed his belief that Plainfield should work with other towns on economic development and public safety, pointing out the need for a second egress from the lower village which will require cooperation with neighboring towns to accomplish. He inquired whether VCRD could be helpful in providing assistance in coordinating with neighboring towns. Cavin Bailey explained that the full process would be within municipal boundaries but that their work has been done regionally in the past. Savage suggested that since Plainfield has already done a lot of brainstorming work on recovery issues that VCRD may start work with the community by addressing plans and work already accomplished. They acknowledged the request for tactical and project based assistance and stated that they focus mainly on facilitation. They shared that some communities have adopted their recovery plan in a more official way. They shared that they can assist with distributing funds or hiring consultants noting this has already been done working with Hatcher on the RFP for a flood recovery consultant.

Frances Rose Subbiondo acknowledged VCRD's offer to assist the Town in fulfilling community hopes. She asked if the Grants Team has met with other Town committees and expressed her belief that the recovery projects will need to be an accurate representation of what the community wants. Hatcher, speaking on behalf of the Grants Team, stated they have not met with committees. They stressed the need for swift action as the most pressing work is urgent and winter is approaching. They stated that long term planning will be next and will address the need for housing, infrastructure, community development, working with the new Goddard owner, and connecting with other municipalities. Billingsley shared his experience as Emergency Management Director through two catastrophic floods and acknowledged the outpouring of volunteers this year. He noted the opportunity for a pilot project for climate adaptation in housing.

Barton suggested improved communication through an “offers and needs” board and asked how people find out what the needs are or how to become involved.

Lloyd Farnham thanked the Grants Team for their work. He reiterated the need for community input in the recovery process and agreed that the Town needs to address the current needs before long term planning decisions are made.

Bissex, noting that the 2024 flood was fifteen to thirty times bigger than the 2023 flood, pointed out the need for flood resiliency planning and design as a community.

Jamele asked if there was still help for those experiencing negative impacts from the previous flood. Billingsley stated that there are mental health resources, building teams, and other resources. He shared that Liz Bicknell and Grace Worcester are available to help connect flood affected community members with resources. Moulton shared that State case managers are also available.

Fancher pointed out there are a lot of people who can't step forward or don't know where they fit in and stated the importance of recovery process planning being accessible to everyone.

Establish next steps - Select Board, Jessica Savage, and Pat Moulton:

Thiboumery asked if the Select Board would be making a decision at this meeting. Bissex stated no, that more discussion is needed. Thiboumery suggested inviting VCRD to attend a Grants Team meeting and a meeting of the Village Expansion Steering Committee.

Savage stated that the next steps for VCRD involvement might not occur right away but stated their availability as a neutral voice to assist the Town in designing and facilitating meetings to convene stakeholders through to the long-term recovery planning.

Bissex encouraged anyone who wants to express their thoughts about the recovery process to reach out to the Select Board.

Discussion and Approval of contract with The Integrity Group to assist with FEMA applications:

Bissex explained that the Grants Team had created an RFP seeking a flood recovery consultant to help the Town secure the maximum amount of funding available to fund the flood recovery efforts. He explained this consultant would be paid for by FEMA and directed by the Town and the consultant would provide their expertise to help the Town access FEMA funding. Hatcher stated that representatives from The Integrity Group were in attendance at this meeting and shared that the Grants Team is learning that there are more funding opportunities available and

that this group has shown success in accessing FEMA funds with other communities in the past. She explained that a \$30,000 grant from the Vermont Community Foundation will be used to pay the group and will then be reimbursed by FEMA to be used over and over. Youngbaer shared that the \$30,000 grant from the Vermont Community Foundation will be put toward hiring the group and explained that the contract is for \$111,000. He stated his understanding that FEMA has the ability to reimburse up to 5% for administration. Executive Vice President of The Integrity Group David Gillespie, who was joined by three other staff members, acknowledged the recovery work of the community and shared that their group has helped many communities through the process of getting FEMA funding. They explained it is a long process with the need for a lot of human capital. They shared that FEMA allows the extra 5% for the administration fees if a town is getting more than one grant. They explained the contract and task order stating that the group gets paid as the Town has the money noting that they can't have a contingency contract. Youngbaer asked if an audit was needed for over \$750,000 in funding. Olivia Schmidt of The Integrity Group stated that it would not be a classic audit but more paperwork and an affidavit. Schmidt described the work of The Integrity Group in other communities and acknowledged the importance of community input.

Youngbaer moved to approve the contract with The Integrity Group and give Karl Bissex authority to sign the contract. Jamele seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

Discussion of use of ARPA Funds to support General Fund:

Towbin provided historical context about the APRA funds. He explained that the Town has \$181,000 that needs to be obligated by December 31, 2024. He stated that \$173,000 was obligated to the Brook Rd. Bridge replacement project that is now delayed indefinitely due to flood damage. He shared that he and Bissex had been informed by the Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT) that the ARPA funds may be obligated to the General Fund after unobligating the funds from the Brook Rd. Bridge project. Bissex voiced agreement stating that bridge engineers have deemed the prior Brook Rd. Bridge design to be inadequate given the 2024 flood damage. He stated that funds, if obligated to the General Fund, would presumably go toward payroll.

Plainfield ARPA Committee member George Cushing pointed out that the committee had made recommendations for the use of the ARPA funds and noted there are many places these funds could be used. He expressed his displeasure with the Town's decision to offer post-flood tax abatement. Youngbaer described and defended the actions of the Board of Abatement. Cushing expressed disappointment with the communication process between the Board of Abatement and himself as Delinquent Tax Collector. Towbin pointed out that the abatement system is not designed for the severity of the flood damage properties experienced. He took responsibility for poor communication with Cushing following the recent abatements ascribing the incorrect tax reports he provided Cushing to recent turnover and underfunded Town administration. John

Harrison asked if the Town's financial shortcomings are all related to abatement or to other budgetary issues as well. Towbin stated that the abatements are leading to some financial difficulties but noted that the 2023 and 2024 floods are the main reason for the Town's financial shortcomings.

Youngbaer requested that a resolution to be drafted to unobligate the ARPA funds from the Brook Rd. Bridge project and to the General Fund and for the issue to be addressed at the next regular Select Board meeting.

No action was taken on this issue.

Authorization of State agreement regarding rental of Mill St. temporary bridge:

Bissex explained that the Town rents the temporary Mill St. Bridge from the State at a cost of \$218 per month. Towbin described the agreement. Subbiondo asked for the current status of the bridge and the cost to prepare the roadway for the bridge. Towbin explained that the temporary bridge was not installed correctly and is in need of improvement which was complicated by the recent need to make improvements to the temporary water and sewer lines which were also damaged in the flood. He stated that there will still be some State funded improvements made to the temporary bridge, although not what was hoped for. Fingas read from the State agreement and asked what amount the Town would be responsible for. Towbin expressed his feeling that it would be minimal. Hatcher stated that the Grants Team would investigate the possible use of FEMA funds for that work. Annie Coughlin asked about the possible use of ARPA funds to replace the Mill St. Bridge. Towbin stated the financial needs of the Town administration are more immediate. Fingas clarified that the ARPA funds need to be obligated by December 31, 2024 and the Mill St. Bridge replacement would not be figured out in time for that deadline.

Fingas moved to authorize an agreement with the State regarding the rental of the Mill St. Bridge for a period of 24 months. Subbiondo seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

Appointment of Josh Pitts as Town Treasurer for 1 year term:

Towbin provided historical context for the position of Town Treasurer and the appointment process. He noted that the amount budgeted for the jointly held Town Clerk/Treasurer position was \$56,000 which would not be enough to support the positions being held by two individuals and began exploration of the needed change from an hourly wage to salaried positions. Fingas stopped Towbin stating that the current discussion is only regarding appointment. Fingas stated that Towbin had advertised the position of Town Treasurer and one application had been received which was from Josh Pitts. He explained the he and Subbiondo had interviewed Pitts and although Pitts is not a trained CPA or auditor he has a long history of working with numbers and possesses many transferrable skills. He shared that Pitts is also Plainfield's Road

Commissioner and one of the Town's Water/Wastewater Commissioners. Subbiondo referred to Pitts as a "creative problem-solver" with a willingness and ability to learn new systems and improve upon them. Youngbaer stated that Towbin would need to resign as Treasurer prior to the appointment of Pitts. Towbin stated his willingness to resign and emphasized the need for the Town Treasurer position to be filled immediately. Subbiondo asked that Towbin explain the mechanism for his resignation. Towbin read from a prepared statement citing Vermont statute and clarified that the Town Treasurer position would come up for reappointed at the next Town Meeting. Charlie Cogbill stated his understanding that the Town Clerk and Town Treasurer positions have always been two separate positions. He pointed out that it's the prerogative of the Town Clerk and Town Treasurer to appoint their own assistants, not for the Select Board to appoint. He further pointed out that the compensation for the Town Clerk and Town Treasurer is not distinguished in the budget that was passed by the voters. He asked if the Select Board members who interviewed Pitts had made any requirements of service beyond what is required by State statute and the Town Charter. Subbiondo stated that she had used the job description as reference and had not cross referenced this description with the State statutes. Fingas stated that the job description had been publicly posted. He pointed out that the voters had empowered the Select Board with the responsibility of appointing a Treasurer and encouraged the conversation to remain on the topic of appointing Pitts as Town Treasurer. Towbin provided a correction to the job description stating that the Town Treasurer would not report to the Town Clerk. Cogbill responded and pointed out that the Town Charter addresses compensation. Subbiondo asked Towbin to elaborate on his concerns about resigning at this meeting. Towbin responded that time is needed to shift authority on banking websites to the new Treasurer. Cushing encouraged the Select Board to make the appointment at this meeting.

Jamele moved to appoint Pitts Treasurer at tonight's meeting. Bissex called for a more specific motion. Subbiondo suggested identifying a transition period to allow for the transfer of credentials. Towbin stated that one week would provide enough time. Youngbaer pointed out that the motion should be contingent on Towbin's resignation.

Youngbaer moved that, conditioned upon Bram Towbin's resignation as Town Treasurer effective October 28, 2024, we appoint Josh Pitts as new Town Treasurer effective October 28, 2024. Jamele seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

Adjourn:

Fingas moved to adjourn. Subbiondo seconded. The motion carried unanimously and the meeting was adjourned at 9:26pm.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Kristin Brosky, Assistant Town Clerk.