

Select Board Members
<input type="checkbox"/> Peter Hood, Chair
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mary Just Skinner, Vice Chair
<input type="checkbox"/> Phil Hyjek
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Steve Martin
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Liz Scharf

MIDDLESEX SELECT BOARD
Thursday, October 6, 2020
REMOTE VIA ZOOM
Middlesex Town Clerk's Office
5 Church Street
Middlesex, Vermont 05602
(802) 223-5915

MINUTES.

PRESENT: Peter O. Hood, Chair, Mary Just Skinner, Vice Chair, Members Steve Martin and Liz Scharf. Treasurer Dorinda Crowell. Conservation Commission Chair Lee Rosberg. Britt Haselton, Farm Project Director of the Vermont Land Trust. Michael Levine, Vic Dwire and Randy Drury. Select Board Assistant Sarah Merriman took the minutes and the meeting was recorded by ORCA.

Call to Order/Amendments

Peter called the meeting to order at 5:06 PM. Peter welcomed guests. Liz asked to include discussion about the results of the planning survey under other business.

MCC'S Request to Expend \$5,000 from Conservation Fund on VLT Project Tabled

In a recap of his September 24, 2020, presentation to the Board, Lee said the MCC has unanimously voted to spend \$5,000 out of the Conservation Fund to assist in the Vermont Land Trust purchase of the development rights on 88 acres of Pease Farm on Culver Hill Road for \$372,070 from Sarah Seidman and Scott Harrower, the owners. The owners would then sell the parcel to farmer Nicole Duch for a more affordable \$276,000. In return, Nicole would farm the land, establish a farm stand and hold events on the property which would never be developed. Otherwise, Nicole would have to pay the current owners a total of \$648,070 (VLT's estimation of the land and outbuildings if sold at fair market value) which would be prohibitive to small farmers like her.

As for public access, Lee and Britt agreed there had been discussion of, but no guarantee, that public access or trails would be assured should the Conservation Fund money be granted.

The \$372,070 for the conservation easement is paid by money from a federal farm bill and state money granted through the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. Lee said the VHCB urges grantees to look for local funding leverage whenever possible and that is why VLT is requesting money from the Conservation Fund, as proof of local support. Since the request aligns with MCC bylaws and the purpose of the Fund – i.e. to permanently conserve land – the MCC is in support of the allocation. Currently there is \$9,000 in the fund.

Britt told the Board he is putting forward this request knowing it's a big ask. He said it is tremendously important to get local leverage because it helps VHCB to leverage limited dollars and helps obtain future grants.

Steve asked what if the \$5,000 isn't put in there. Does the project go forward? Britt said the contract is to purchase the easement at full value. The current owners could decide not to move forward if they don't get the \$5,000 and or they could go forward with less. Liz asked why the VLT chose this property. Britt there are several intriguing attractions – its proximity to Montpelier, that there aren't that many farms in Middlesex and it's a beautiful spot to hold farm events. Dorinda asked if the VLT has ever looked at the vast Appel property behind it. Britt said he was unaware of it. Mostly, the VLT responds to willing landowners who approach the Land Trust. In this case, Sarah and Scott told VLT they are ready to retire and wanted the land to continue to be farmed and be affordable to a farmer, though the 88 acres are not currently farmed.

Lee said the MCC was attracted to the project because it has a different flavor than recent projects that focus on woodland conservation and recreational access. There isn't a lot of agricultural land in Middlesex, he said, and the MCC like the idea of preserving farmland.

Randy Drury asked about the duration of the easement. Britt said the easement runs with the land so it's permanent. Randy confirmed there was no formal agreement for town use in any way. Britt said this type of easement usually does not entail public access.

Dorinda noted this land was already in current use and asked about the tax impact with a permanent conservation easement. Britt said it depends on the listers. He also noted the

owners are retaining their current house and surrounding land so there might not be that much of a tax hit.

Sarah Merriman spoke in opposition of granting the request noting that at a time when taxpayers are suffering a financial blow due to COVID, the Town should not be giving \$5,000 of tax dollars to a private land deal. Vic agreed. Michael said during COVID keeping access to land becomes more and more important and though public access is not guaranteed, without the \$5,000 from the Conservation Fund it is off the table. Peter said conserving land is the purpose of the Conservation Fund. It's not as if this money is coming out of our budget. Liz agreed saying voters have approved the fund for this purpose. Since the deal was not approaching a deadline, the Board concurred that it needed more time to make a decision.

MOTION: Steve moved and Liz seconded passing over the item tonight and taking it up at another Select Board meeting. The motion passed.

Plans to Manage Town Forest

Lee said the MCC is exploring whether the Town Forest's forest management plan could include a timber harvest and it was recommended the Commission seek a forest consultant. He said the Commission intends on seeking bids with a goal toward generating revenue so the MCC could stop asking taxpayers for money. He just wanted to apprise the Board of its plans. Lee left the meeting.

Clarifying certain parts of the Town's Personnel Policy

Due to time constraints, the Board moved this to the next meeting.

Highway Report

Steve, who is also Road Commissioner, said the Highway Department is installing posts and gates at the Town sand pit to eliminate public access. They have also completed a parking area for the Town Forest. Before getting back to maintaining the roads, the crew will make sure all the equipment is ready for winter. The Road Foreman is resigning effective October 16th and, in the meantime, the Town may have to hire individuals to help out with just the plowing.

Randy asked what happened to the plan to expend \$40,000 on hiring someone just to do ditching over the summer. Steve said that never happened since the Road Crew did the ditching, per the desire of several townspeople. Randy said since the ditcher was to be contracted so the crew could focus on other summer maintenance, what got done? Steve said he would provide Randy with a separate report. Peter said the money was part of the 2020-2021 overall highway budget.

Treasurer Report

Dorinda and the Board reviewed VLCT's figures for the value of Town buildings. Peter said at some point a separate appraiser should be brought in to assess the value. Dorinda said she would return the list to the Town's insurance carrier as is, though the MVFD has not confirmed the status of its vehicles.

OTHER BUSINESS

MOTION: Mary moved and Steve seconded approval of the minutes for the September 15, 24 and 29 Select Board meetings. The motion passed.

All orders were reviewed and approved via email.

The Board briefly discussed the results of the planning survey which would be revisited at the next meeting on October 20, 2020.

The meeting adjourned at 6:04 PM.

Respectfully submitted by Sarah Merriman, Town Clerk/Select Board Assistant

THE ABOVE MINUTES WERE REMOTELY APPROVED AS A WARNED AGENDA ITEM AT A REGULARLY SCHEDULED MEETING OF THE MIDDLESEX SELECT BOARD ON OCTOBER 20, 2020.

PETER O. HOOD, CHAIR

MARY JUST SKINNER, VICE CHAIR

N/A
PHILIP HYJEK

STEVEN MARTIN

ELIZABETH SCHARF

DRAFT