

**TOWN OF WALPOLE
JOINT MEETING
TOWN OF WALPOLE SELECTBOARD
TOWN OF ROCKINGHAM SELECTBOARD
NOVEMBER 7, 2019**

The following Selectboard members and invited guests were present:

Walpole Selectboard: Steven Dalessio (Chair); Peggy Pschirrer; Cheryl Mayberry

Rockingham Selectboard: Peter Golec (Chair); Susan Hammond; Stefan Golec

Also Present: Wendy Harrison - Town of Rockingham - Town Manager
J.B. Mack – Southwest Region Planning Commission
Susan Westa - Windham Regional Commission

CALL TO ORDER: Mr. Dalessio called this Joint Meeting to order at 6:30 PM in the Walpole Town Hall. The Walpole Selectboard is hosting this Joint Meeting with the Rockingham Selectboard. This meeting is being recorded. He introduced everyone and turned this meeting over to Mr. J.B. Mack.

Mr. Mack thanked everyone for attending this meeting. He began with some background information. Windham Regional Commission is based in Brattleboro and serves Windham County areas. Southwest Region Planning Commission serves both Vermont and New Hampshire. For a long time they have been hearing there is a need and interest to address the Vilas Bridge. About a year ago they brought Planning Board members together to talk about getting the two towns together to discuss issues of mutual concern. The Vilas Bridge was one mutual issue however, there are other issues to address as well. Subsequent to that first meeting there were other joint Planning Board meetings. They found other issues like workforce housing, economic development, the Vilas Bridge and recreational projects that could benefit both towns. Issues that came to the surface to focus on were a united way for the two towns to work together, how to move forward and take advantage of the re-licensing of the Great River Hydro Dam. They thought it important to have the elected officials in both communities meet to discuss these issues. Ms. Susan Westa and he offered to facilitate the conversation and also to provide the latest information they know about these two issues.

Mr. Mack provided two packets of information. One packet was the New Hampshire Department of Transportation 2021-2030 Ten Year Plan on the Vilas Bridge Rehabilitation Over The Connecticut River and the second packet included Excerpts from the Connecticut River Conservancy Recreation Survey Summary. He felt they could start with discussion on the Vilas Bridge.

Vilas Bridge: Mr. Mack explained that the NH Department of Transportation (DOT) develops a Ten Year Plan; it is a list of all the projects in NH that the State intends to work on over a 10 Year period and where the funding is going to come from to pay for these projects. The Vilas Bridge was in the previous 10 Year Plan and is also in this one. This is a draft plan that will be going before Governor Sununu and then the Legislature. They think the bridge will stay in this plan. The first page states “50% funding needed from other sources”. Over the years the Vilas Bridge has fallen lower on the list because of the enormous number of bridges that need rehabilitation. He understands the NH DOT has approached Vtrans in Vermont about doing the 50-50 cost share. NH owns rights to the Connecticut River so they are required by law to pay for everything to the high water mark (about 73%) on the VT side of the river. A lot of people want to see this bridge come back. A great deal of economic activity in the downtown area on the VT side has been lost and residents in Walpole have expressed an interest in seeing the bridge open again. Truck traffic will be diverted when repairs are being made to the Arch Bridge. Truck traffic will

have to go as far north as Charlestown-Springfield to cross that bridge. With this meeting they hope to start a conversation on strategies they can take to have a more united voice.

Mr. S. Golec pointed out that there is a sewer line that runs across the river underneath the Vilas Bridge. It is a big issue. Walpole has been talking about moving the line and running it by the Five Star Beverage Store and across the Arch Bridge. He did not see this mentioned in the report. Mr. Mack agreed that it is not but they realize it is an issue. Mr. Dalessio said this sewer line is the environmental impact. Nobody is pushing this issue but if that line breaks it becomes a catastrophic issue with the River. The bridge presents both economic and environmental impacts. Walpole has done some surveying and pre-engineering work on moving the line through Green Street in North Walpole. There are obstacles though with the railroad tracks and the ledge. Mrs. Pschirrer mentioned the line also runs up State Highway 12. Mr. Dalessio added from an environmental stand-point it should be on top. We need to be prepared in the event something does happen to that sewer line.

Mr. Mack asked if there is potential to get VT to pay more toward the rehabilitation. Mr. S. Golec mentioned the Hinsdale Bridge. Mr. Mack explained that was a Grant project for Brattleboro-Hinsdale. Mrs. Pschirrer feels they could make the same economic case for the Vilas Bridge. Mr. Mack stated that typically the State takes the lead on those Grants. There was discussion regarding the fact that the Vilas Bridge is the only bridge on the list as 50% funded. Mr. Mack explained on page one of the Ten Year Plan “NON-PAR (other)” means the funding will come from another source. Both the Federal and the States are feeling the crunch for infrastructure monies. Total estimate for the Vilas Bridge is \$10,228,550. NH is prepared to pay \$5,100,000. A starting point is good communication between Walpole and Rockingham. The Planning Commissions have talked about several ideas. One suggestion was to do an Economic Study to show the economic benefits. Have factual data that shows the value of the bridge to the two states. If it indicates it is more beneficial to VT maybe they would get the Legislature in VT to take another look at it. Mrs. Pschirrer mentioned they discussed this recently with Senator Jay Kahn. Walpole has to start talking about the environmental impact and the Connecticut River. NH tends to feel the Vilas Bridge is more beneficial to the economy for the State of VT and that is why they are holding back. Mr. Mack advised they had a GASIT meeting in Keene on this Ten Year Plan and Representative Lucy Weber did support the Vilas Bridge and encouraged them to support and fund it. Mr. Dalessio feels it will be settled Governor to Governor.

Mrs. Wendy Harrison mentioned the Northern Borders Program. Is Mr. Mack working with that group? Mr. Mack replied not yet. It is an entity that promotes economic development for the northern states. Cheshire County recently became a part of that. This is a newer opportunity that just came into play as a potential funding source. Mrs. Harrison said it could become a part of a match. Mr. Mack said there were some projects in Cheshire County that did happen through this program.

At this time the meeting was opened to the public.

Mr. Gary Fox from Rockingham advised that for local funds such as the Northern Borders Program there is a case with economic development projects on the Island in Bellows Falls. The Vilas Bridge opens onto that area. This area lost the paper industry in 1985 and the mill was recently demolished. Because of the loss of the paper industry the area would qualify for a Forestry Grant. The only problem is the funds are available for shovel ready projects. Mr. Dalessio noted the funds would be going to a State infrastructure not a local infrastructure. Mr. Mack feels NH sees this bridge as a liability rather than an asset. If the towns ever wanted to take the Vilas and Arch Bridges the State would give them up but he would not recommend doing this. The Vilas Bridge deck is in really bad shape. Some recent inspections found that the spandrel columns are deteriorating significantly. He referenced Load Rating calculations in the Ten Year Plan graph. In the past there was discussion about why not having a pedestrian bridge

only. The NH engineers said this would be almost the same as having trucks on it. They would have to plan on a big party being held on the bridge. It is not a viable option.

Mrs. Deborah Wright, President of the Village of Bellows Falls Board of Trustees, advised there does not seem to be any consideration given to the fact that the Vilas Bridge is an historic bridge. Mrs. Harrison felt the engineering might be done in 2023. Will NH still do this work if they do not have the other 50% funding. Mr. Mack will check on this. Mrs. Harrison felt it would be good to have a date for when the other 50% funding source would be required for the project to move forward.

Mr. Mack summarized that they heard ideas including going after Grants and pushing the environmental aspect. Mr. Dalessio and Mrs. Harrison will work together on drafting a joint letter stressing the economic and environmental sides for rehabilitation of the Vilas Bridge. Mrs. Harrison pointed out that the Village of Bellows Falls Trustees would be interested in signing on as well. Mutual Aid and the Fire and Police Departments have expressed concern because of getting blocked off by a train or traffic congestion on the Arch Bridge. Mr. Dalessio said this is a good start. Rockingham will take the lead.

Mrs. Pschirrer mentioned the Town of Walpole has the oldest population in Cheshire County. They are not attracting younger people. We will have economic problems in 10-to-15 years from now. A resident mentioned the train station. We should have trains that go to Boston, Maine, etc. That would attract more people. Mr. Mack said there have been some up-grades to the rails in VT and Massachusetts. They are expecting growth with Montreal to Boston trains. A resident spoke about developing trails. Some trails could be opened up to more recreational activities including bikers.

Great River Hydro: Mr. Mack advised another issue that came up was the Great River Hydro as they are re-licensing their dams. The community can weigh-in on recreational opportunities along the River. The towns with two voices could work together. He had printed copies of sections relevant to the Walpole and Rockingham areas from the Excerpts from a Connecticut River Conservancy Recreation Survey Summary. These are ideas from local citizens. There is a copy of a letter from the Connecticut River Conservancy to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission about their interpretation of that survey and the kinds of things they would like to see happen during the re-licensing. Talking with residents in Rockingham and Walpole he heard about the Herrick's Cove boat launch and picnic area and having better portage areas. There are areas where access to the River could be improved. Mr. Fox said some time ago a Kayaking Company was looking at the River. Mrs. Pschirrer added there could be more mountain bike trails. Mr. Dalessio noted they could have a marketing campaign for tourism. They could find enough people to form a committee to work on a trails development program. Walpole recently acquired a piece of property that might add to this program. Mr. Mack suggested they work together.

Lighting on Arch Bridge: Ms. Susan Hammond mentioned the issue of lighting on the Arch Bridge. Mr. Dalessio said the NH DOT stated there has not been an accident or an injury therefore they do not see a need for lighting. Mrs. Pschirrer noted but it is dark. A lot of pedestrians cross it at all hours of the day/night. Ms. Hammond feels there has to be funding available plus solar lights could be researched. Mrs. Harrison will email Mr. Dalessio about the lights.

Warming Shelter: Mrs. Wright reported that the Warming Shelter will no longer be in North Walpole. It will now be in a building next to the former Big Red Barn on Route 5 in Westminster.

There were 15 members of the public in attendance. There being no other comments, Mr. Dalessio closed this Joint Meeting at 7:22 PM. Following a brief recess, the Walpole Selectboard will begin their regular scheduled meeting.

TOWN OF WALPOLE

Selectboard

[Signature]
Peggy A. Schurr
Cheryl M. Mayben

11/14/19

Date