

## Minutes of the Board of Selectmen Meeting

This meeting of the Board of Selectmen was called to order at 6:00PM on Thursday, March 16, 2023 at the North Brookfield Police Department. Jason Petraitis, John Tripp, and Brooke Canada were present.

Note: This meeting was postponed from Tuesday, March 14 due to inclement weather.

Financial Items: ARPA recommendation. Mr. Petraitis read a letter from ARPA recommending the purchase of a battery for the AED machine in the Town Offices. Mr. Tripp moved, and Mrs. Canada seconded, a motion to approve \$296.00 of APRA funds for this purchase. So voted.

Old Business: Hearing for Opt out of Vote by Mail. Town Clerk, Tara Hayes, stated she asked the Board to hold this hearing and opt out of vote by mail for the 2023 Municipal Election. She said only two people asked her questions about this, and no one as applied to vote by mail for this election. Vote by mail was instituted in 2020, the state mailed postcards to all registered voters, which gave voters the ability to vote by mail for no "reason." With absentee vote by mail the voter signs under the pains and penalties-swearing they have a religious or medical reason for not attending the polls, or that they will be out of Town during voting hours. Tara explained it is not her intent to disenfranchise the voters, just to save money and make sure every vote is received and counted. She said the best way to do this is to vote at the polls, but there is also early voting and absentee voting for those who cannot make it to the polls. Mr. Petraitis asked the difference between mail in and absentee voting, Tara said none really, and the most absentee requests she's had is 10. Mr. Petraitis clarified that if someone votes absentee they must request or apply for it. Tara said she won't have to mail out postcards to everyone. Tashena Holmes asked for the expense, Tara said processing and mailing the vote by mail requests takes a lot of time. Tashena asked if Tara was already processing because of early voting, Tara said no, when you do early voting she checks you off the list and the ballot gets brought to the polls and processed there. Tara explained a situation where a husband and wife living in the same house requested mail in voting. Both voted and placed their ballots in the mail the same day, Tara received the husband's ballot and didn't receive the wife's until 10 days after the election. The wife was tracking her ballot and knew it was not received by the Town Clerk so she was able to vote at the polls. Tashena said she wants to understand the extra cost of mail in voting. Tara said data entry, printing, stuffing envelopes, postage, and a lot of additional time. Tashena asked if the Town pays extra, Tara said she works extra, but doesn't get paid for it. Tashena asked how many mail in votes. Tara said in September 2022 she had 384 people request to vote by mail, 222 were returned. Mrs. Canada asked if the local and primary elections were tracked separately, Tara said yes. Mr. Tripp asked if the Registrars got paid, Tara said yes, at the 2020 Election she paid people to be at the polls all day. Mr. Tripp noted there's an extra step because the election workers need to be sure each person hadn't voted by mail. Tara said the only reason vote by mail was started was because of the pandemic. Jamie Gilman asked how he would vote absentee. Tara said you can apply online or by mail, she has even driven to people's homes to drop off ballots. Tara said during COVID she was reimbursed for State and Federal elections. Mrs. Canada said there hadn't been a municipal election since mail in, but there is a need for it. Mrs. Canada said that for absentee voting, if you're caught lying you could face a \$10,000 fine or 5 years in prison. Brandon Avery said the need for mail in voting only arose during the pandemic, this is a small town with a small staff, mail in voting creates a huge workload. There are only so many resources available to the town staff. We have early voting and absentee voting. Jamie Gilman asked if mail in voting resulted in more voters. Mrs. Canada said the statistics online show the state elections-in November 2022 voting numbers decreased by 53%,

but in November 2020 there was a 75% increase in votes. Tara noted that the November 2020 election was a presidential election and those numbers are always more. She also noted the opting out of vote by mail would affect municipal elections only. Mr. Petraitis asked about the mail in vote process. Tara explained and said she would often get ballots back there were not signed, not filled in correctly, not placed in the proper envelope. If there were only 10 mail in or absentee voters she could reach out to individuals and let them know there was an issue with their ballot, but that's impossible to do with 384 mail in votes. Tara explained we only be opting out one year at a time. Tashena asked if we're the only town to opt out, Tara said no. Tashena asked how Tara would combat confusion, Tara said it will be on the website and Town Alert app. Jamie asked if there was difference in who initiates process for mail in vs. absentee. Tara said they are both initiated by the voter. Mr. Petraitis confirmed mail in and absentee processes are the same, except with absentee you are attesting you can't get to the polls. Mrs. Canada said that absentee voting is confusing, some people aren't willing to face a \$10,000.00 fine or 5 years in prison. Tashena agreed the questions are nuanced and people are scared. Brandon said if you want your vote to count go to the polls or early voting. Tara said everyone's vote is precious. She asked if everyone would be comfortable mailing themselves \$1,000.00 cash. Brandon said mail in voting opens more problems than it solves. Tara said she's willing to be open Saturdays and Sundays if there's enough interest in early voting. Danielle said every vote counts, especially with close elections, and people may not be able to make it to the polls. Tashena said it's up the individual to make the choice. Mike Hinkley said we don't have enough data either way, during the pandemic people were paying more attention to elections.

Mr. Tripp moved, and Mrs. Canada seconded, a motion to approve opting out of vote by mail for the 2023 municipal election. Discussion: Mrs. Canada said for her, as a representative of voting public, she's received a lot of feedback. She knows it's a lot of work, she wants to see more information and feels there's a need for mail in voting. She believes this will become state mandate, she doesn't want to vote to opt out. Mr. Tripp said he thinks mail in voting should go away, it was put in place because of the pandemic, which is over. There are still 3 options for voting, doing this will save work and money. Mr. Petraitis asked if it was offered for last year's municipal election. Ashley wasn't sure, Tashena said no it was not. Mr. Petraitis said he's torn and sees both sides of the argument. All in favor? Mr. Petraitis, aye, Mr. Tripp, aye, Mrs. Canada nay. So voted.

Roger Bibinski Jr-Lake Lashaway Presentation. Roger gave the Board a copy of his presentation. Roger is the President of the Lake Lashaway Association, he also had Marco and Rick with him. They reviewed the management plan of the lake. They went through the history of the lake and concern over water quality and invasive weeds. They surveyed the lake and established a contract for chemical herbicide treatment over multiple years. The Lake Lashaway Association is trying to find ways to financially support this plan, they have membership fees but not all residents are part of the association and the income isn't sufficient to cover the cost. They are planning fundraisers, annual appeals, and corporate sponsorship. The Town of East Brookfield is contributing \$5,000.00 and the association is asking for North Brookfield's support as well. The association is pleased with the results shown so far, maps show before and after treatment with large reduction in invasive species. They try to be vigilant, but there are a lot of boaters on the lake that bring other species into the environment. Mr. Petraitis said the Town surely supports the plan, but he can't commit to money right now, it would need to be appropriated at town meeting. Mr. Petraitis asked how much money they are asking for, Roger said it would change yearly depending on the treatment for that year. Mr. Petraitis asked how far downstream the chemicals

go. Roger said they dissipate quickly and there is no residual effect. All chemicals are posted online. They give a notice of intent and conditions, and get approval from DEP and both East and North Brookfield's Conservation Commissions. Mr. Tripp asked if the member dues are voluntary, Roger confirmed they are. Mr. Tripp asked if signage could be added to make sure boats are clean before entering the water. Roger said there is a small sign, and they've requested permission for additional signage to be placed. There are a lot of boaters from out of town that are not aware of the issue. Brandon Avery said the Lake Lashaway Association is great to work with, they are transparent and keep the Conservation Commission updated. There is a similar treatment at Brooks Pond. Brandon asked if they looked into grants. They have but there are no grants for weed treatment. Tashena Holmes asked if this is part of the beach. Roger said it helps keep the beach open for swimming, they are closely tied but a separate entity. Roger said the Town tests at the beach, but they'd like to see more areas of the lake tested. Mr. Petraitis said they would look into options for providing funding. Rick, East Brookfield Finance Committee member, stated that there is a high phosphorous level in the lake due to farms upstream. Roger said the 2019 survey showed the level was lower than thought, and they've urged lake residents to not use chemicals on their lawns. A lot of the issues on the lake are caused upstream, DEP told the association to focus on what they can control, upstream issues are out of their hands. Mr. Petraitis thanked Roger for the presentation.

Mike Hinkley, speaking on behalf of Vibram, is planning an Earth Day Town clean up event. In past years people have picked up trash along Rt. 67, he's trying to get Vibram more involved and asked anyone that notices an area of town that needs some cleaning to let him know. Mike asked for support. Mr. Tripp asked what type of cleanup they're planning, trash, brush, debris? Mike said yes, all of it. Mr. Tripp told him to go ahead. Mike said he's been in touch with Sue Lewandowski, Tashena suggested Mike should contact the High School. Mr. Petraitis asked how many people would be involved, Mike said last year there were 20-30 people. Mr. Petraitis said we could have multiple clean up days if there are enough volunteers.

#### Public Comment:

Meghan Cloutier wanted to discuss the cost of electricity. There is an open market, but she has less power than towns, and there are a lot of predatory companies. She said that Towns can negotiate electric rates through aggregate plans. She began asking the Town about their plan in January, and was told a plan was submitted to DPU in 2019. She wrote to her representatives and Anne Gobi responded and provided contact information for DPU. Meghan said she's been communicating with Ashley Barre, who is very fastidious, but isn't a town official. She's asking the town officials to follow up on and secure the aggregation plan. Mr. Petraitis said the Board has been in touch and are waiting to hear back from DPU, he doesn't know what the hold up is. Mr. Tripp said that when you hear from Ashley, it's coming from the board. Meghan thanked the board and said it's important to her that people are working on this.

Danielle Mann asked how it works if you're on the Board of Selectmen and other committees. Mr. Petraitis said they can't appoint themselves to committees, but can be elected.

Tashena said she's disappointed the Board is not reviewing the Small Town Pride event request, they agreed to change the date. Joanne Carey said she went to the Small Town Pride event in West Brookfield and there were drag queens suggestively dressed twerking in front of children for hours. She

feels the Board should not approve this if it's a drag queen event. Tashena told Joanne that she didn't need to attend the event if she's uncomfortable with it. Mr. Petraitis said this is not a debate.

Announcements:

Mr. Petraitis read an announcement about Town Election.

Mr. Tripp said the Board is looking for donations for the little park and 4<sup>th</sup> of July event. He also asked for volunteers to shovel the park, as he can't right now. He said Tim Canada helped after the storm.

Mr. Petraitis thanked the Highway for their storm cleanup efforts, and thanked the Police and Fire for their assistance. He also thanked NBEMA for keeping the public informed throughout.

There being no further business, Mr. Tripp moved, and Mrs. Canada seconded, a motion to adjourn. So voted.

Respectfully Submitted,

Ashley Barre