

MINUTES OF THE SELECT BOARD
Monday, February 1, 2016 – 10:00 AM

Present: Lorn Buxton, Chair, David McGuckin, Selectman, Bill Stewart, Selectman, and Bette Jane Riordan, Secretary.

Also present: Pam Cullen, Assistant to the Select Board, Jim Cerny, Town Historian, Bill Cronin, Lisa Williams, Mundy Tarbell, Laura Smith, Mark Busanceney, Leonard Seagren, Bill Kingston, Joanne Ireland, Paul Lynn, Reggie Whitehouse, Rita Fusco, Sharon Platt, Peter Rice, Craig Strehl.

1. Approve Select Board Minutes of January 25, 2016.

Selectman McGuckin made a Motion to Approve the Select Board meeting minutes of January 25, 2016 as amended. Selectman Stewart seconded, and the Motion carried.

2. Public Q&A.

Chair Buxton explained the purpose of this session and asked those speaking about the recent Tarbell fire to pose their questions, and then the Board would respond to them at the end of the questioning. He introduced Selectman Bill Stewart who began by stating that the fire was a terrible tragedy for the Tarbell family, for those living there, and for the Town. He expressed appreciation and commended all of the departments, volunteers, and others who responded to the fire, and stated all are grateful that there was no loss of life. He noted that the Select Board is very serious in continuing to investigate and examine all relevant information to determine what transpired, what worked, what didn't and how we can learn from this. Chair Buxton opened the meeting to the public for their questions and comments. He reiterated that the Select Board's response to each question would come at the conclusion of the Public Q&A.

Joanne Ireland asked if the Town had received any report form the State Fire Marshall.

Mundy Tarbell stated he felt the comments in the local newspaper seemed contradictory. He asked for specifics, including a timeline, and why the lack of use of seawater.

Craig Strehl cited the mention in the local paper of Peter Tarlton's comments regarding his time as a volunteer member of the CIP Committee a few years ago, and requested a copy of the report.

Laura Smith expressed her concerns about contradictory assertions regarding high tide v. low tide which appeared in the local paper. She noted it was a full moon with the tide coming in, whereas the Fire Chief was quoted as saying it was low tide. She would like that clarified.

Mark Busanceney, owner of 218 Wentworth Road and also part owner of a parcel near the sight of the fire, expressed concerns about insurance rates. The local paper reported that New Castle is listed at a rating of 5 out of 10, and wondered why the Town is not ranked higher. He asked what needed to be done to address this matter. He asked about preventative maintenance.

Pam Cullen, Assistant to the Select Board stated the rates and property values reported in the newspaper were incorrect.

Joanne Ireland wanted to know when the last major fire took place in Town.

Rita Fusco a resident of the village area located in the historic district expressed sadness over the loss of the Tarbell home, but wondered what might have occurred if the fire had been in the historic district where homes are older and close together.

Chair Buxton called for any additional questions on this subject and there being none, the Select Board began its responses.

Chair Buxton first addressed the questions regarding insurance rates and ratings. He explained that the ISO rating of 5 is not bad, noting that less than 14% of towns and cities in the state have a higher rating. Portsmouth is rated as a 4. No municipalities have the ranking of 1. Ratings are provided by a publicly traded for profit organization.

The Town has not yet received any report from the State Fire Marshall. He noted that the fire was well underway before any call was made. Selectman Stewart noted that because excavators were called in, much of the evidence regarding the origin of the fire was lost. Select McGuckin asked if the Fire Wards were going to submit a report. Fire Ward Reggie Whitehouse said the next meeting of the Fire Wards is February 9th and he would bring that matter to the attention of the group.

With respect to Mundy Tarbell's questions concerning contradictions, Chair Buxton explained that the local paper had access to previous older articles, and that the status of the tide as reported was wrong. As for seawater usage as an option, Chair Buxton stated there are two options, one of which is what occurred; a shuttle of fire trucks with reservoirs. The other would be utilization of seawater. Both options can't be used at the same time. As explained by 17- year veteran volunteer firefighter Bill Cronin, in order to use seawater, they would have to have good access, and in this case bringing a truck on site would have resulted in the truck sinking and getting stuck. Also that option would have been labor intensive. The best option was utilized.

Selectman McGuckin addressed the fire hydrants issue. He stated that there was water main break Saturday evening. Between Saturday at 6PM and Sunday at 6PM Portsmouth noted over a million gallons of water usage, most of which was used for extinguishing the fire. The break occurred in the back channel. The Town responded first thing Monday AM. He acknowledged there was low water pressure for a period of time on that end of the island. Reggie Whitehouse concurred. He noted that one of the hydrants froze up after 10 seconds, but other sources were utilized.

Chair Buxton then addressed the issue of what can be done to improve the situation.

He noted that the Town has been in discussions with the City of Portsmouth to integrate the water and sewer systems with them. New Castle is a small town with limited resources. We have a two-person Public Works Department. There are no resources to make significant improvements. Portsmouth has hired a firm to do an analysis of New Castle's infrastructure, and the report has just been completed. The Select Board is meeting on February 11th to review the report.

Chair Buxton addressed Rita's concerns about the potential for a serious fire threatening the historic district, and referred her to Bill Cronin who outlined some options. One is to have your home monitored by a company, which for a minimal cost, they notify the Fire Department. His advice upon discovery of a fire in the home is to "Get out, stay out and call 911".

Reggie Whitehouse stated the initial report he heard from dispatch was that the fire was out, when in fact it was not, and someone needed to put it out. He discussed major fires since the 1960's which involved a total of 20 homes. The three major fires were the Jaffrey Cottage on Wild Rose Lane, which had the same conditions as the Tarbell fire; the Wentworth Hotel's garages and dorms in 1969, where a life was lost; and the Tarbell fire. He stated that once the fire gets in the walls, and no one is there right away, it's hard to open up. Reggie stated when he first arrived he could actually hear the fire going up the inside of the walls. In all instances of fighting these fires, the Department has done its best.

Chair Buxton stated based upon on the debriefing with the Fire Chief the Fire Department is to be commended for their performance. At this point Chair Buxton began to conclude this Public Q&A but Selectman McGuckin and Selectman Stewart voted to keep going with the discussion.

Laura Smith had a follow up questions regarding assurances for adequate water pressure given the amount of building going on and the conditions of the hydrants. Chair Buxton stated the water infrastructure issue is not a new concern and the Town has been working with Portsmouth for years regarding major upgrades. Selectman McGuckin added that we are at the end of the water line from Portsmouth. He stated the hydrants are serviced every six months. Portsmouth has half and New Castle has half. He advised residents that in addition to Bill Cronin's suggestion, to take personal action. Ask a member of the Fire Department and the Building Inspector's office to come to their homes and check for problems. This could reduce the chance of fire.

Bill Cronin stated that the Fire Department continues to improve and mentioned the new truck with its capacity to use foam.

Craig Strehl who lives in the village/historic district where homes are so close together suggested installing water tanks near the Fire Station as reserves for fire fighting. Bill Cronin said would be possible. Craig suggested a rule that all homeowners should have monitors. Chair Buxton explained that municipalities are restricted in this State. The Legislature has enacted a law which prohibits municipalities from having sprinkler systems.

Jim Cerny noted that when the Wentworth Bridge is replaced in 2019, both New Castle and Portsmouth have voted for a fixed bridge, which would allow the hanging of new water lines on the bridge into New Castle. The State Dept. of Transportation has recommended a fixed bridge, but the matter is currently in the hands of the Coast Guard.

Joanne Ireland stated she has learned a lot being the spouse of a firefighter, and advised the new residents coming into town that they understand their neighbors live twelve feet away, and perhaps its wise to check on insurance rates and other matters.

In response to Rita Fusco's question about whether insurance rates will go up, Chair Buxton responded they probably would not. Pam Cullen conferred with the Building Inspector regarding smoke detectors, and learned that they should be replaced every ten years.

Mundy Tarbell asked if it would be possible to tie in a fire hydrant to the water. (river) Bill Cronin stated it was possible. Reggie Whitehouse noted that a section line couldn't go in the river as it would fill up with clams.

Bill Cronin stated the Fire Department did a great job. Chair Buxton also commended other communities for their mutual aid. Selectman Stewart stated it was a great community effort.

3. Items.

a. Preparathon.

Selectman Stewart explained the purpose of the group, sponsored by FEMA, which is to prepare communities for certain disasters and to educate communities on how to respond to such situations. Fire Chief Blanding attended the most recent meeting, and the next meeting is February 5th at the Fire House. The roll out is in April.

b. Update on USS Providence committee.

Pam Cullen reported on the committee's progress to date, explaining that New Castle is the host town for the command and crew of the USS Providence which will be based in the area for the next 15 months. A Mission Statement has been developed and the Resident Sticker has been redesigned with the sub's logo. Paul Hamblett is the point person for this. Jenny Rosenson is also on the committee and designed the new resident sticker. The Town has had the Commander and two of his crew speak at the community supper club which was attended by 45 residents. Articles are being published in the Islander and Island Items, as well as the Portsmouth Herald. They have designed a T-shirt as a fundraiser. They are in the process of finalizing a Town benefits/event guide for the crew and their families. Selectman McGuckin stated the crew is an excellent resource for the Town, such as assisting in cleaning up the Common. Jim Cerny stated the Historical Society is working a spouse of one of the crew on educational programs at the Museum.

4. Other Old Business - None.

5. Other New Business – None.

6. Committee Reports.

Chair Buxton noted that the Planning Board is in the process of revising the ordinances to place before the voters at May Town Meeting. There will be a public hearing held prior to that time. He explained that ordinances dealing with Elections and land use issues appear on the ballot. Financial warrants are voted upon at the evening meeting. Proposed changes go through the Planning Board initially prior to going into a warrant article. The other option for placing a warrant article before the voters is by petition with 25 resident signatures. The third method is the Select Board can also add a warrant article on its own.

There being no further business to come before the Board, the meeting was adjourned.

Meeting adjourned at 11:03 AM.