

**Minutes of Bethel Community Potluck Gathering
on Town and School Budget Processes
and Bethel Select Board Meeting
and Bethel School Board Meeting.
September 3, 2015 at Bethel Town Hall**

Attending:

Select Board members Lisa Hill and Carl Russell; Town Manager Keith Arlund; School Board members Dave Eddy, Chair, Todd Sears, Lisa Floyd, Tamela Ennis, Nancy Cyphers; school administrators Owen Bradley and Andrea Bowen; Town Meeting Committee members Rick Benson, Jean Burnham, Davis Dimock, Lisa McCrory, Ola O'dell, Rebecca Stone and Victoria Weber; and members of the public for a total of over 50 people.

Rick Benson, Chair of the Bethel Town Meeting Committee, called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm. He asked for a moment of silence to remember long time resident and perennial walker, Chris Masters, who died in Massachusetts this week.

This gathering is co-sponsored by the Bethel Revitalization Initiative. Kirk White of the BRI described the group as searching for creative ways to stimulate our community. They meet monthly at the Bethel Village Sandwich Shop. They sponsor a monthly potluck supper, have a Facebook page about those potlucks, and are about to begin working on the third season of Bethel University which will be held during March 2016. The first planning meeting for 'B.U.' will be September 29th at 6:30 pm, probably downstairs in the Town Hall.

Carl Russell called the Select Board meeting, which had been adjourned from August 24th, to order at 7:04. Dave Eddy called the adjourned School Board Meeting to order at 7:05.

Rick introduced the evening by saying that folks have expressed frustration not having enough input into town and school budgets. The Town Meeting Committee's mission is ***Helping foster informed and engaged citizens: Creating an environment in which individuals are welcomed, respected, supported and valued.*** We are trying to educate people on how to be involved. Tonight will focus on the nuts and bolts of budget creation so that people will be able to be involved, usually at a school board or select board meeting.

Carl Russell spoke saying that in order to engage citizens and get them involved, boards and staff need to provide information. He repeated a saying he likes which says "people don't become involved to get information – informed people become involved".

Russell went on to say that the select board hired the town manager to create the budget (among other tasks). One person coming to the board with thoughtful, critical insights is valued, but to actually make changes, a group of people is better. To put something on

the Warning for Town Meeting, citizens must present a petition to the Town Clerk 47 days prior to town meeting that has been signed by at least 5% of the over 1,300 registered voters in Bethel, or about 68 people.

Lucien Hinkle asked for clarification about who is responsible for the budget – both creation and administration - the select board or the town manager.

Russell said that overall the select board is trying to open the doors to the process so more people can come in and take part in town meeting, in local governance and in budget creation.

Town of Bethel Budget Creation

Town Manager Keith Arlund spoke about budget preparation for the municipality. Many costs are not controllable, such as insurance for people, buildings and equipment. Revenue sources include the 3 'enterprise funds' of water, wastewater/sewer, and transfer station/solid waste. For the general fund, revenue comes from property taxes, state aid to highways for our 60-65 miles of Class 1, 2 and 3 highways, and grant money for things like a culvert inventory carried out last year and an assessment of all the town highways that is taking place now. Both these inventory/assessments will allow prioritization of highway work and the ability to let the public know when work on which roads is planned, just as work on North Main Street is scheduled for this fall. There is also a plan going forward for replacing highway equipment.

The town now has an evaluation system for employees so in addition to 2-3% annual increases, there is some money for bonuses based on performance.

Arlund welcomes citizen input into the budget, accomplished by people coming to the Selectboard meetings when particular topics will be discussed, as set out in the handout he distributed (attached to these minutes). Arlund is going to try to publish draft budgets for each section of the overall town budget prior to the meetings when they will be discussed. He hopes this will help the town communicate the budget information to the people in a better manner.

Mary Pavone asked about delinquent tax collection. Arlund said there is a new *Policy/Procedure on Collection of Delinquent Taxes and Utilities* that the select board adopted on 3-10-14. He is about to begin applying it to both delinquent tax and water bills. [This policy is reprinted on page 37 of the 2014 Bethel Town Report and also on the Town of Bethel webpage.]

Davis Dimock asked whether the board and/or the town manager have a percent increase they don't want to go over while they are creating the budget. Carl Russell answered that they don't have a policy that they can only increase the budget a certain percent. They go by what they have done in the past.

School Budget Creation

School Board member Todd Sears spoke about where and when citizens can engage in the school budget creation. He handed out a Timeline (attached) showing which school board meetings welcome citizen input through November 16th. November 30th 2015 is the final cut-off for 'Good Ideas' for the school budget that townspeople will vote on in early March. There will be an information session in mid-November and possibly another in October, dates to be determined.

The budget creation process has already begun with school administrators asking teachers and staff what their needs are to service the kids. The school board will discuss their priorities and provide guidance to the administrators at the September 21st board meeting. These drivers and guidance include analysis of teacher-to-staff ratios, information technology (IT) and on-line opportunities in the classroom, supervisory union issues as our Windsor North West Supervisory Union combines with the Orange Windsor Supervisory Union to form the new 10-town, 8 operating schools, White River Valley Supervisory Union, Act 46, and public input.

Due to the extraordinary meeting schedule during consolidation deliberations, the school board will be changing some meeting dates to consolidate meetings with Royalton and find some efficiencies to save the administrators travel and meeting time. Meetings will be held on the third Monday in odd-numbered months, and the first Tuesday in even-numbered months, so check dates carefully when you want to attend a meeting to give your input. Also see the attached timeline. School board meetings will be Monday Sept. 16th, Tuesday October 6th, Monday November 16th and Monday November 30th. The information session dates have yet to be announced.

Sears said that the board will discuss making draft budgets available before meetings so that citizens will be able to see the numbers that are being considered. These would be accessible on the Bethel Schools web site.

Sears ended by encouraging citizens to come to an "Ed Talk" conference event at Vermont Law School on October 4th at 1 pm to discuss issues surrounding the supervisory union consolidation and to directly solicit citizen input during facilitated sessions. He had a handout of Frequently Asked Questions about the consolidation. He again encouraged citizens to attend the school board meetings this fall and to run for school board themselves.

Question Period:

A new resident asked where projected budgets and board meeting minutes will be published. Sears said school board minutes are available on the Bethel Schools web site. He also said the school board hopes to include a one page Summary Budget in the school budget this year.

Asked about Vermont Act 46, Sears said it is giving Bethel a double punch because we have to adapt to the SU consolidation at the same time we (like all other school boards in Vermont) must respond to Act 46. He added “as a community we can shape this the way we want, OR we will be dictated to by Montpelier if we don’t reach a solution by 2018”. State Senator Dick McCormack said he had not voted for Act 46 as he was not convinced it was good. Act 46 is an attempt to lower school budgets and therefore property taxes, but schools which already have lean budgets may find it had to comply.

Ola O’dell asked about delinquent water bills. Carl Russell said they would be handled according to the new Policy on Delinquent Taxes and Utilities mentioned earlier. He pointed out that the Town is not a lending institution. We have been too lenient in the past and some people have built up such a large amount that they cannot pay.

Rick Benson showed the audience the magazine-sized **Town Operator’s Manual** from the town of Middlesex, explaining that it is an example of the manual or handbook that the Town Meeting Committee would like to create for Bethel. It would contain information such as that shared tonight, as well as other government, recreation, community, etc., information that would be useful to citizens to take full advantage of living in Bethel. The Committee will be working with the select board and to obtain small grants to bring this Manual into existence for Bethel.

Carl Russell ended the gathering by saying “we are all available. Call or talk to any of us”.

Rick Benson adjourned all three concurrent meetings at 7:55pm.

Minutes by Victoria Weber, Secretary of Bethel Town Meeting Committee, September 5, 2015.

See attached handouts of Town of Bethel budget schedule, and School Budget timeline.

Town of Bethel
FY'17 Budget & FY'16 Annual Report Schedule

We will not receive new health insurance rates until mid-October.

October 5, 2015 (Moved due to the October 12 holiday).

- Administration/Personnel
- Highway Budget

October 26, 2015

- Selection of Dedication for Annual Report

November 9, 2015

- General Fund Budget

November 23, 2015

- Continuation of Administration/Personnel, if needed
- Draft of Selectboard Report

December 14, 2015

- Enterprise Funds: Water, Sewer, Solid Waste (review)
- Draft of Annual Report (excluding final budget & committee reports)

December 28, 2015

- Final Budget Discussion, if necessary

December 31, 2015

- Deadline for Submission of Committee Reports

January 11, 2016

- Finalize Town Meeting Warning and Annual Report

January 15, 2016

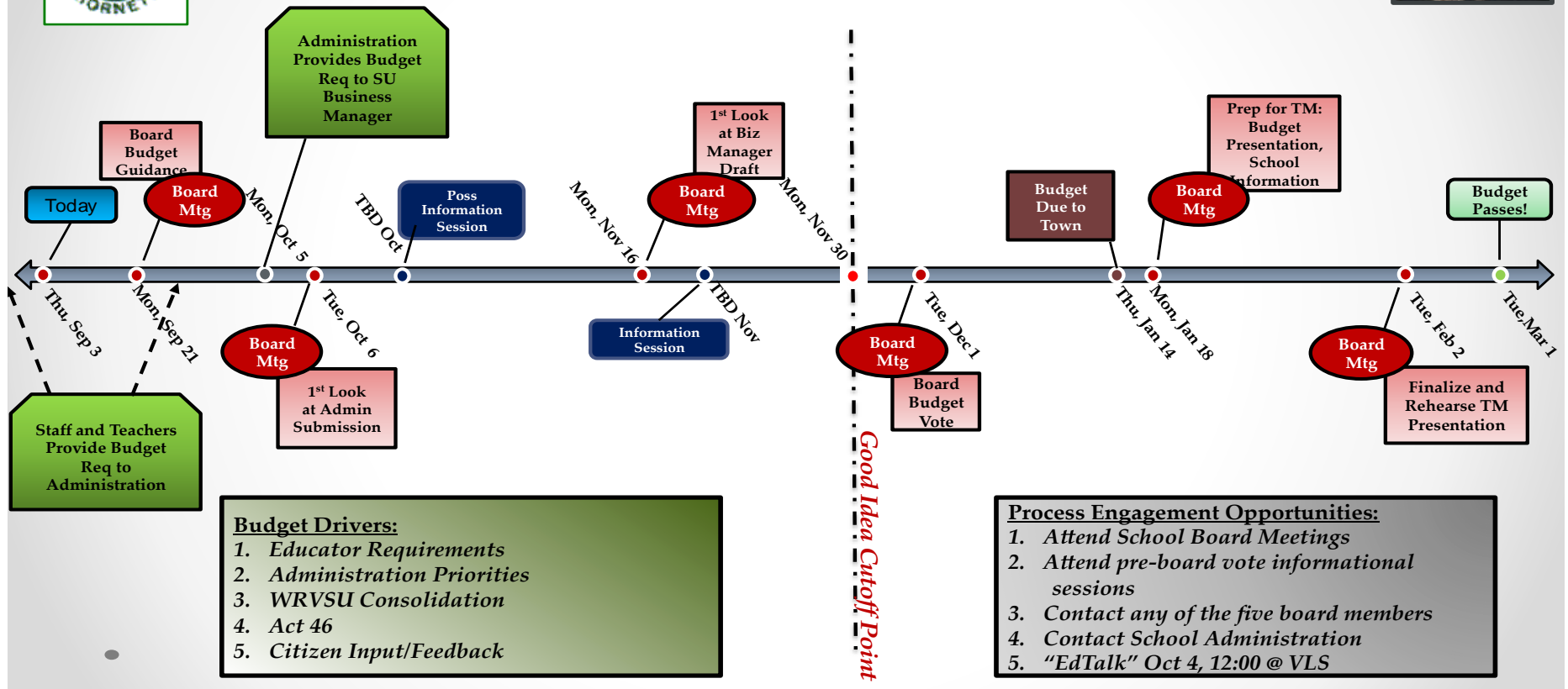
- Deadline for School to submit their portion of Annual Report to Abbie

January 21, 2016

- First Day to Post Town Meeting Warning
- Submit Town Report to Spaulding Press for publishing & Mailing



Bethel School Board Budget Timeline



- Budget Drivers:**
1. Educator Requirements
 2. Administration Priorities
 3. WRVSU Consolidation
 4. Act 46
 5. Citizen Input/Feedback

- Process Engagement Opportunities:**
1. Attend School Board Meetings
 2. Attend pre-board vote informational sessions
 3. Contact any of the five board members
 4. Contact School Administration
 5. "EdTalk" Oct 4, 12:00 @ VLS