

**DRAFT Bethel Town Meeting Solutions Committee Minutes**  
**First meeting: January 3, 2014 -- 12:15 at Town Clerk's Office**

The Bethel Select Board established a Town Meeting Solutions Committee late in 2013 to address concerns from the 2013 town meeting, and to investigate ways to further the community building process of direct democracy that Vermont town meetings make possible.

In April 2013 the Selectboard decided they would like to continue to hold town meeting at the town hall, at least until they can address concerns raised in 2013 and see if they can be remedied. One of the main charges of the committee is to offer suggestions to improve the functionality of the process of town meeting, which especially includes parking, access to the building, and the timely flow of people into the building and within the hall during paper ballot votes.

The Board appointed Town Moderator Eric/Rick Benson, Town Clerk Jean Burnham, and citizen Victoria Weber. Select man Carl Russell is an ex-officio member. The Selectboard and the Committee hope that other interested citizens will join them.

Rick Benson volunteered to be chair; Victoria volunteered to be secretary.

**Our Goal**

We began by agreeing that any and all changes we might make would be with the **goal of improving functionality of town meeting**. This includes getting the meeting to begin in a more timely way, and moving people more quickly into the building and around it during votes, as well as helping people with mobility issues get into the building, and improving parking opportunities.

**Information into Town Report**

We will inform citizens of the existence of the Committee and of changes in parking and check-in, etc., for the 2014 town meeting by having up to one page in the 2013 Bethel Town Report. The deadline is January 9<sup>th</sup>. Victoria will draft and send to others for comments. We each have people to check with and the results to add to the information in the report.

**Parking**

- The committee will petition the Selectboard to set aside the west half of the municipal parking lot for citizens who have mobility issues. Signs will be posted and we will ask everyone to honor them, and if they do not have limited mobility, to park elsewhere.
- Carl volunteered to be in the parking lot prior to town meeting to encourage people to leave those spots for elders and those who need them.
- We will ask Valley Motors, Mascoma Bank and Bethel Mills if we can use some of their parking areas for town meeting attendees. We will also utilize the White Church parking lot by asking Stagecoach commuters to park to the back and in a compact way that day.
- At the same time we are cognizant that Main Street businesses (and the Post Office) need to retain some parking spaces so they can conduct business. Therefore we ask citizens not to park in front of Main Street businesses or the Post Office .

**Shuttle service**

- We have arranged with the Bethel schools to provide a school bus to shuttle people from the Valley Motors and the White Church parking lots, and perhaps Depot apartments, over to the town hall in a continuous circuit.
- Victoria will ask The Stagecoach if they could provide a mini bus to shuttle people over from The Depot Apartments. The town would need to pay any fee for this.

### **Flow of People into the Hall : Check-in**

- We have a goal of town meeting starting on time, at 10 am. We remind citizens that they should be checked in and seated by 10am. Since this, as well as finding parking, can take some time, citizens are encouraged to allow plenty of time for these activities.
- Check-in will be streamlined with the intention of getting people into the hall in a more timely manner. Instead of one table at the back of the hall, there will be two tables, opposite one another. One is for names beginning with A-L, and the other for names beginning with M-Z. There will be a third, A-Z, table by the handicapped access door at the rear of the hall, to the east of the stage.
- Signs will remind people to follow state law by stating their name as they approach the checkers, rather than expecting the checkers to know who they are. They will also be asked to spell their last name, again to make it easier for the checkers to find them on the voters checklist.
- The Checklists will be printed out in larger font so that the checkers can find names more quickly.
- There will also be a name tag table at the front of the hall. This is another way to speed up the check-in process. Currently citizens stand by the check-in table and write their names on a tag, which prevents people behind them in line from reaching the checkers and checking in. In 2014 citizens will be handed a blank name tag by the checker. They will then be asked to walk down to the table at the front of the hall where there will be markers, a wastebasket, and blank ballot slips. This should keep the flow of people moving faster, and also get folks into the hall, from which point they can find a seat.
- Once the meeting begins, the rear door check-in table will be removed and any late arrivers through the back door will need to walk over to the main check-in tables. The two checklists will then be consolidated, which is mandated in order to count ballots.
- To inform citizens of these changes and to respond to any confusion, there will be a person in the upper lobby acting as a monitor and informer to explain the new process, and direct folks to the proper check-in table. There will also be signs.

### **Flow of People within the Hall, especially during Paper Ballots**

- Whenever there is a paper ballot on a vote, voters mark their slips at their seats, then get up and file by the ballot box at the front of the hall, which Jean Burnham monitors to be sure each voter has a name tag, verifying that they were checked in on the voter checklist. Then they file back to their seats.
- To improve the flow, we ask that the crew who sets up chairs leaves more space in the rear of the hall, and also more space at the sides. Chairs can be set up a little closer to the front of the hall, leaving less space there. This is because some citizens, and late arrivals, tend to stand in the back of the hall, and few people seem to want to be in front. For a faster flow of people during ballot votes, as well as for general safety, the spaces around the chairs should be increased, even if it means a few fewer chairs are set up.

### **Displays, Exhibits and Food**

- For the reasons just stated, safety and expediency, the Committee determined that any informational displays be set up in the small meeting room downstairs. This room was not available in 2013 due to a vote on courthouse funding that was taking place.
- Girl Scout cookie sales and any coffee or food shall be located in the downstairs lobby, and/or in the small meeting room.
- We realize this is not ideal, but the functionality of the town meeting takes precedence and this year we need to do everything we can to make the meeting flow smoothly and safely.

### **Media/ Informing citizens**

- We will try to reach as many people as possible to explain the new parking and check-in procedures. We will write about the new procedures in the Bethel Town Report, and they will be mentioned in both the Selectboard's introductory letter and in the Town Clerk's announcement on the Bethel page of *The Herald* just before town meeting.
- Beyond these official locations, we will have at least one article in *The Herald of Randolph*, in the online *Bethel Courier*, on the listserv Bethel Front Porch, and perhaps on the town webpage.
- We will also try to reach groups. Rick will inform Rotary and BBA, Carl will tell a few groups, including BRI.

### **Discussion at Town Meeting**

- We would like to take advantage of the ideas and opinions of the people who are actually attending town meeting, by including a discussion of citizen's concerns and suggestions on how to make town meeting more useful, better attended, more understood and even more fun.
- This would be an opportunity for the committee and the Selectboard to hear citizens' desires and concerns for town meeting, and to help the solutions committee to target their work for the next year toward the issues citizens had expressed.
- [ Some Vermont towns, like Middlesex, have been working for a number of years to improve participation in town meeting and, by extension, in town civil affairs in general. Besides getting more people to town meeting, they have made it possible for those who cannot attend physically to participate using electronic media and phones. Some of these ideas might be applied in Bethel in the future. ]
- We discussed whether to warn an item on the agenda for the meeting – which would alert people to the coming discussion and allow them to prepare to speak. OR should it just be included in Other Business at the end of the meeting? In that case, moderator Rick Benson would mention that the discussion was coming up during his opening remarks. In either event there would not be a vote.
- Rick will do some research on whether a separate item, or a discussion as part of Other Business would be best, and how to word them.

### **Tasks**

Rick: check with Valley Motors, Rotary, BBA, Credit Union and Bill Hall re CU staff parking. Check on wording for warning re discussion.

Carl: Check with Bethel Mills, BRI, get sandwich boards for signs ready.

Jean: Contact Nick Nikolaidis, town crew or ??? re chair and 4 tables set-up.

Victoria : Check with Stage Coach, Mascoma Bank, School and art teacher Marie Herow re students making signs. Identify which signs are needed, how to attach them for maximum visibility, how to have them produced. Slips for commuter car windshields by White Church. Draft copy for Town Report, Bethel Front Porch, *Herald*.

**Next meeting will be Tuesday, January 28<sup>th</sup> at 12:15 at Bethel Town Clerk's Office.**

**Any interested citizen is encouraged to attend.**

