

Bethel Town Meeting Committee Minutes of May 27, 2015

Present: Rick Benson (chair), Jean Burnham, Lucien Hinkle, Neil Brooks, Rebecca Stone, Davis Dimock, Victoria Weber.

The meeting was called to order at 3:30. Minutes of the April 27th meeting were accepted with the correction of the announcement for this meeting and time.

Town Meeting Survey

We have 24 more responses. Our goal remains 100 responses from non-attendees, so we will keep trying to find places and ways to get responses. Food Shelf, pool and Concerts on the Green are possibilities.

Collaborating with the School Board

Rick spoke with Chair Dave Eddy and Todd Sears. They are happy to have us work with them. Dave wants us to focus on the budget process and getting people involved early in the process, while changes can still be made. Rick will get more specific information on their process to see how they think we can help.

Town Report

Davis had reviewed 7 town reports from nearby towns. Rebecca reviewed some electronic town reports (almost every town now has their report online) from Vermont and some other states.

Davis' conclusions are:

- There are some changes we can make to our Report that do not involve more pages.
- He gathered quite a few other ideas (which the group added to) of how to improve ours (see below).
- He focused on the narrative elements, not budget number presentation. Lucien agreed to take the reports and look at the budget aspects of them.
- We need to sort out what could be added or changed in the town report vs. what should go into an 'Operator's Manual'. The Report represents a specific chunk of time, and is produced annually. The Manual would have more generalized information and would be produced much less frequently, possibly every 10 years.

Rebecca showed us some examples of town reports which do a good job at incorporating graphics. She explained that research shows that including graphic presentation of information really helps people assimilate it. Davis agreed that where we had graphics this year the information really does leap off the page, and is more community-friendly, more lively. This in turn engenders more interest in the processes that the information is describing. Presenting text in two columns also makes it significantly easier to read and follow.

FOLLOWING IS A LIST OF POSSIBLE CHANGES TO MAKE BETHEL'S TOWN REPORT (AND OPERATOR'S MANUAL) MORE EFFECTIVE:

- Presenting the narrative in 2 columns.
- How to appeal a tax bill
- Table of incompatible officers (ex.: why a coach cannot be on the school board).
- Lists of offices both elected and appointed, and their basic duties.
- Photos of the Select Board, ideally in color, and perhaps town staff, so that people can recognize them.
- An expanded Lister's Report (Braintree, Chelsea, and Tunbridge are good examples) with information on how the grand list has changed over the past few years, common level of appraisal, and an explanation of the four part state-wide Education Funding Formula for coming up with the individual tax rate [cost per pupil ÷ statewide grant × statewide property tax ÷ town common level of appraisal].
- More than just a summary of Minutes of Town Meeting for the previous year. Royalton, especially, sets out the issues raised on the floor and the effect is friendly, informative, and community-engendering.
- Table of anticipated tax rate and what different warned items would cost in terms of the tax rate (Pittsfield).
- Summary paragraphs/reports for the Constable (Rochester), the Bethel Front Porch Forum, the town webpage and Facebook page.
- For organizations (especially the Human services Agencies) that are asking for funding, include the amount they are requesting after their name in the organization description in the body of the report.
- More 'almanac' type information about things like dog licenses, open hours of town offices, town clerk and transfer station, etc. on the back of the cover page at the beginning of the Report.
- Initial information on permits - what one needs a permit for and how to begin the process.
- An organizational chart for the town – who does what and where to go for help (Montpelier). This would help people understand all the tasks and services the Town does provide, and therefore understand where their tax money goes.

[See attached Table of Contents from the *Middlesex Operator's Manual* to give an idea of the topics it covers.]

SPECIFIC BUDGET INFORMATION IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Locate the 3-year budget table for the school on the last page for easy reference
- A 3-year table for the town budget
- A statement of liabilities this year (a grand total of government and proprietary liabilities in an extra column).
- The actual auditor's report in printed format.
- A 5-year highway improvement plan of where work will be done and at what level.
- A chart showing the plan for equipment to be bought, and when.
- Locating information on special articles and why they are on the agenda earlier in the report, as close as possible to the Warning.
- More complete lists of what money was spent on, not just categories.

- More charts generally. Montpelier does a good job of treating budget numbers in ways that make them more understandable.
- Use shading and spacing to make budget charts easier to read.

We realize there is a financial concern with adding pages to the town report. There are also mailing costs. Jean pointed out that the Report is mailed to every property owner and person on the voting checklist, and that it would be better to cut that somewhat. Many towns do not do mass mailings like this. They let people pickup the reports OR request that one be mailed. Changing our practices to save postage would need to be balanced by the fact that we are trying to reach and engage as many people as possible.

Our plan is to break these ideas down into:

- What can be re-arranged without adding extra pages.
- Those ideas that would add to the overall page count.
- Financial and budget information suggestions.
- What might be in an Operator's Manual.

Then we can present our ideas to the Selectboard.

Overall we are trying to empower people to take part in their town's governance and community. Information is power. By making information about Bethel accessible we hope to engender participation and ownership in our community.

Town Topics/Informational Meetings

Rebecca reported that the Bethel Revitalization Initiative (BRI) folks are happy to work with us on their Bethel Pot Luck gatherings (which are on the 2nd Sunday of the month). We might alternate their suppers, which have been at individual's homes, with pot luck meetings at the town hall (a more neutral space with easy access).

So we plan to hold one in September to begin getting citizens involved in the creations of the school and town budgets. At this time we view the creation of the two budgets as the main Town Topic. Rick will ask Todd Sears and Carl Russell to explain the respective budget processes at the September gathering.

Rebecca suggested that we might have an initial gathering in the hall in July to introduce our group to the townspeople, to share what we are trying to achieve, and to ask citizens what town topics they want to explore, especially things that we can do something about as a town. We plan to do this on Sunday July 12th. We intend to write a letter to the editor before these meetings to explain our goals. We would co-host this meeting/supper with the BRI and ask them to help introduce our group to the people there and to open a discussion on our focus and on people's concerns about town issues. We realize we need a simple mission statement, which we will work on at our next meeting, and then run by the Selectboard.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:05.

Our next meetings will be on:
Monday June 22nd at 3:30 pm, and
Monday, July 27th at 3:30 pm.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Victoria Weber, Secretary, June 30, 2015