Bethlehem Board of Selectmen

Meeting Minutes

July 10th, 2023

In person –Chairman Morris, Selectman Strand, Selectman Hibberd, and Selectman Bruno.

Public Input- Chris Jensen asked for an update regarding the proposed pedestrian walkway on 302 at Presidential Mountain Resort.

Minutes 6/26-Postponed until the next meeting.

Cottage on Main (Sean Gawlick letter of support for NH Liquor commissioner) **Selectman Hibberd made a motion to send a letter of support for Sean Gawlick to sell wine at Cottage on Main. Selectman Bruno seconded and all were in favor.**

Alder Brook Road- Chairman Morris explained that DOT is seeking clarification regarding the classification of Alder Brook Road. The town of Bethlehem considered Alder Brook to be a private road and DOT has is classified as VI. Chairman Morris continued that Littleton was able to confirm classification from the 1958 Town meeting however we have not located a warrant regarding Alder Brook Road. Mary Polanski introduced her attorney, Sheridan T. Brown, explained her interest in Alder Brook Road, and her opposition to gravel pit that abuts her property. Attorney Brown gave a brief history of Alder Brook explaining it once was considered a public road. Chairman Morris explained because Bethlehem did not have supporting documentation to the classification of the road it would require a warrant for the 2024 town meeting. Chairman Morris continued Brett Jackson, the Road Agent, would sign off on requests for on behalf of. Ms. Polanski thanked the board for their efforts and stated she just wanted to make sure everything was done correctly.

Town property sign policy Selectman Strand read a prepared statement saying she never thought the sign would be an issue to put in front of the town building but as a result it started important dialog for the town. Selectman Strand entire statement is attached to the minutes. Selectman Hibberd stated she is disappointed and does not understand how the sign became so political. Selectman Hibberd continued the message is about inclusion and welcoming everyone into our community. Chairman Morris stated that the town had consulted the attorney and it was recommended to have a town property sign policy to reduce the risk of future legal issues. Chairman Morris continued that the town has a sign ordinance, and it should be followed. Selectman Bruno thanked Selectman Strand for the work she had done to bring the discussion forward and that he wanted to keep the focus on signs on municipal property. Betsey Philips, Longfellow Dr, read a prepared statement about how the signs came in existence. Ms. Philips entire statement is attached to the minutes. Chris Jensen suggested using the town “Just Be” logo with welcome and Allegra Wright felt that did not accurately represent the meaning behind the sign. Selectman Strand thanked everyone who came to the meeting and for the respectful conversation that was insighted.

Liaison/Committee Update Selectman Bruno updated the board on the progress of the highway department new garage doors and the Fire Departments successful cleanout of the containers in preparation for the new parking area. Selectman Strand updated the board that the Transfer Station was denied the USDA grant, but they are going to continue to seek funding.

**Chairman Morris made a motion to abate 409-032-031. Selectman Hibberd seconded and all were in favor.**

Non-public Session per RSA 91A-3 II (personnel, reputation, and legal) Chairman Morris made a motion to go into non-public per RSA-91A-3 for reasons of legal, personnel, and reputation. Select person Strand seconded and roll call followed.

**Chairman Morris made a motion to accept the repurchase agreement. Selectman Hibberd seconded and all were in favor. Selectman Strand abstained.**

**Chairman Morris made a motion to increase the Police department pay per Chief DeMoranville’s recommendation effective immediately. Selectman Hibberd seconded and all were in favor.**

**Chairman Morris made a motion to adjourn at 9:00. Selectman Strand seconded and all were in favor.**

**Nancy Strand’s Statement:**

As most are aware, I made a request of the Board in our last meeting to post the “Everybody Belongs” sign on the lawn of Town Hall. This produced a 20-minute discussion among the Board members, including input from the public. The result was I withdrew the request saying I needed to think about the points raised in that discussion and the Board unanimously voted to table this until our next meeting.

While everyone who participated in the discussion seemed to agree that the message of inclusivity was a good one, there were two primary issues that came up as problems. One was that because the sign had “rainbow colors”, it was seen as a political statement and that some would have problems with it appearing on municipal property. The second was that having the sign on Town Hall property might open “a can of worms” where others would approach the Select Board with requests for other signs to be placed.

Just for clarity, I want to make sure everyone knows that I was NOT approached by anyone with a request for sign placement at Town Hall. I WAS approached via email to see if I wanted one for my own property. This was because I was one of the 200+ people who signed the full-page ad of the same message that appeared in the local newspapers.

Bethlehem’s Select Board is our governing body. As such, we set a tone for our community and hopefully lead with a vision of the future of Bethlehem that represents the interests and expectations of our community. Inclusion is a cornerstone of a vibrant and healthy community. While I can’t speak for all five of our Select Board members, I agree with the following statement from “Our Friends Our Neighbors”: “There is a nationwide effort to target, marginalize, harass, and even criminalize our friends and neighbors in the LGBTQ community. We are distraught at the level of intolerance and cruelty we are seeing daily, both across America and here in New Hampshire.”

The LGTBQ community is incredibly diverse. They are Republicans, Democrats, Independents, Communists, Socialists and everything in between. They are religious, agnostic, aetheists. They are our doctors, business owners, artists, teachers, pastors, first responders, lawyers, pro athletes – any role you can think of. They ARE our neighbors and our friends. Their message of being accepted is not a political statement; it is a social one. It’s about being treated the same as everyone else. Because of this, I feel that a message of inclusivity is more important now than ever.

Surprised by the pushback about placing this sign at Town Hall, I thought maybe we could avoid the controversy by removing the spectrum of color bar on the sign. I reached out to the group that initiated the newspaper ad and the yard signs and they were not in favor of this. As one put it: “The colors are merely a symbolic representation of the text on the sign. To disagree with the colors is really disagreeing with the message.”

We reached out to our Town Attorney for some clarification on the legality of sign placement on municipal property. His response indicated that we should have a policy that defines government speech before putting up any sign on town property. He went on to explain that the policy should be sterile, not message driven, and used an example of “the town will allow signs on town property that promote economic development for the town”.

Without a sign policy for municipal property in place, and because I don’t think anyone wants a Town Hall lawn full of signs, I will not be motioning to put this sign at Town Hall. I am heartened to see the sign at many businesses and homes and am glad that the sign has generated a lot of discussion. One result is that the Select Board will address a town policy regarding signage on municipal property. I welcome input and discussion from my fellow board members and the public.

**Betsey Philips Statement:**

In 2009 Same sex marriage was made legal in the New Hampshire. That same year there was a move afoot around the state to get select boards to go on record in opposition to same sex marriage. Those of us who are allies of the LGBTQ community recognized that members of this community are our friends and our neighbors and that this kind of discrimination was wrong. We formed an informal group and called ourselves Our Friends Our Neighbors. We raised enough money to buy an ad in support of same sex marriage in the Littleton Courier. Over 200 local community members signed the ad. It was a way to let members of the LGBTQ community know that we were with them and that they weren’t alone. Then in 2015 The US Supreme Court declared same-sex marriage legal nationwide.

We thought our battle was over but fast forward to today and the anti-gay and mostly anti-trans sentiment and legislation around our state and our nation. The recent cancellation of Drag Story Hour at the Lancaster library is a good example of what I’m talking about. It’s hateful, hurtful and it’s negatively affecting people’s lives. The 80 year old director of the Lancaster library, Barbara Robarts, was harassed with ugly emails and threatening phone calls. We resurrected our group, Our Friends Our Neighbors. We raised more money and put ads in the Courier, the Littleton Record, the Caledonian and the Coos County Democrat. Our ad said that in the North Country Everyone Belongs. And we mean Everyone. We don’t accept exceptions. We had over 200 people sign the ad in the Courier. And an additional 80+ sign the add in the Democrat. We ran out of room for names.

We had the signs made that say Everyone Belongs and they have been going like hot cakes. Today we received our 4th batch of 100 signs. We get requests every day from people who want to put up a sign at their property or their business. Some of those people are here tonight.

I was heartened by the thoughtful discussion at the last selectboard meeting around this issue and I was distressed that the minority view won the day. The slippery slope argument misses the point, is a cop out and whether it’s a political issue or not in my mind is debatable. Today there isn’t much that hasn’t been made political. But we’re talking about human lives here.

It’s very sad that concerns about the reaction of a few people in town has kept us from offering a welcome to the LGBTQ community. We’ve had to accommodate people who would discriminate against other people just because of who they are.

What is the message that Bethlehem is sending now? Not everyone is welcome here? And who gets to decide who is and who isn’t?

Let’s not kid ourselves into thinking that this is a discussion about signs. It’s not.