Special Select board Meeting

November 12, 2021

7:00pm

Athens Town Office

Present were Fact TV, Darlene Wyman, Janet Perry, Lynn Morgan, Dennis Mirante, Tim Stevenson, David Bemis, Kate Bova, Dan Taylor, April Lyman, Donna Currier, Tina White, Linda Taylor, Bonnie Hitchcock, Tanya Noyes, Diane Hitchcock, Denise Randall and Bridget Anderson.

David called the meeting to order at 7:03 pm.

David asked if there was any reason why the meeting should not go on. Seeing none the board went to adjustments to the agenda.

Janet asked that the board discuss reimbursing Matt for gas for the leaf blower. David added it after number four on the agenda.

Public comments: Sherry asked about the email list concerning notification of special meetings. This list was never generated. Sherry ask that it be clarified who was responsible for this list. Sherry generated a request to be formally notified by email if there is a special meeting for anyone wishing to sign it. Sherry wished to thank Denise for making note of the irregularities that had been identified and arose concerns in the last Town meeting and hopes the board will take that in serious consideration. Sherry stated she was very disappointed in the fact that what she has heard about notifications in the newspaper about meetings really has to do with the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law. She said it was very easy to get a notification of a meeting in the Reformer by sending an email to the newsreformer.com and stating meeting box item. Denise stated the board has the obligation to inform the Reformer but they do not have the obligation to print the notice.

Kate stated she would like a better explanation what the meeting is actually all about. To keep Town meetings in person or to get rid of it completely or is it just for one year because of Covid like last year. David stated it was to let the people decide at a town meeting whether they wanted to vote by Australian ballot or if they did not. Kate asked if it was just to vote whether to vote by Australian ballot or at town meeting. David stated the special meeting was to decide whether to have Town meeting by Australian ballot or not. Denise stated this meeting was to set a date for a Special Town meeting for the voters to decide whether we are going to have regular Town meeting or vote by Australian ballot. Janet stated the only two articles on the proposed warning would be to see if the voters of Athens want to elect town officials by Australian ballot and the other article was to see if the voters wanted to do by Australian ballot to approve the budget and other monetary articles. Kate asked if it was about getting rid of Town meeting. Janet replied no we’d always have Town meeting. Janet stated the only difference would be if they wanted to vote the officials by Australian ballot and it would be similar to how neighboring town votes. You vote by Australian ballot for elected officials everything else would be in Town meeting in person. David asked Kate how the board could answer her question to make it clearer. Kate replied this is a Special town meeting to see how the voters want to vote in March. David stated that was correct.

Lynn reported she was asked by the school board to inform folks at the meeting that our vote could have an effect on how voting on school district articles will be done in the future. All towns within a school district, by state law, must vote on school district articles on the same day and in the same manner.

Tina stated she had a statement she would like to read but would also like to follow up on Kate’s question. She stated the board is deciding tonight whether the Special town meeting will be Australian ballot or in person. She asked if it was just for the Special town meeting. David stated that originally the Special town meeting was to be held in person similar to this meeting. Since then Janet looked into it, but the vote right now is whether it is to be Australian ballot or in person. Tina stated that was not the impression they got from the last two meetings. They were under the impression that the Special town meeting what they are voting on tonight was to have the Special town meeting Australian ballot to change how our Town meeting would be in March. In Tina’s statement she was concerned the actions of the board in bringing about the Special Town Meeting makes it seem like they are not listening to voters and are trying to change things for their own reasons. She asked the board do as the voters have asked and hold the Special Town Meeting in person. She stated the reasons the board gave for the change was due to Covid precautions and it was difficult to take the board seriously since they continue to hold in person meetings without wearing masks. The second reason was that when the school vote was done by Australian ballot, the voter turnout was comparable to past elections and was substantially lower than Town Meeting showing that Australian ballots do not necessarily lead to more voter participation. She was concerned that the voters were not notified by the Town facebook page or the Athenian and the meeting had to be rescheduled twice because it was not properly warned. She stated that a petition was presented to the board with 96 signatures requesting the Special Town Meeting be held in person. She shared seven reasons what people have told her about holding Town Meeting in person. In conclusion she stated the select board is forcing the town to have a Special Town Meeting that residents didn’t ask for. If you’re going to force us to have a Special Town Meeting, you need to do the right thing and listen to the voters and have it in person. David stated last year it was the select board that moved the Town Meeting from the standard Town Meeting to an Australian ballot. There is the possibility that would happen again this year. The board did not want to do that. They wanted the people to decide whether to have an Australian ballot or not. Tina asked why this couldn’t be put in as an article for the March in person meeting. She didn’t think at this point there would not be any cancellations of any meetings due to Covid. She asked what the big push is to have the special meeting now. David stated we are having spikes in Covid in the state and don’t know where we’ll be in January. We don’t know if we are going to be locked down again. This is to help the people tell us how and where the meeting is going to be. It’s not about telling people what to do, but them telling the board what they want to do.

Kate stated that she was disappointed that the board was not wearing masks. David stated while there was a mask mandate the board did wear masks and the state of Vermont does not have a mandate now. Anna stated that it was in the Reformer that several state representatives are asking the governor to mandate wearing masks.

Linda stated it was her understanding that the special meeting coming up the board wanted it to be by Australian ballot. David stated that when it was voted on at the last select board meeting it was to be an in person meeting. Vermont League of Cities and towns stated we needed a special meeting to come up with a warning and approve the warning as it was written. It was voted to have the special meeting on December 9th at 6:00pm. There was nothing in the vote about an Australian ballot. Linda stated she felt it was implied to them that the board wanted an Australian ballot for the special meeting.

April asked if the board was planning on having the special meeting in person where all the talk about Australian ballot is coming from. David stated it was not to vote at the special town meeting to vote by Australian ballot but was a discussion about having to decide what the regular Town Meeting was going to be. It was not to have the special meeting to be by Australian ballot. Darlene stated there were going to be two articles for the special town meeting to be discussed. Article one was to see whether the officers were going to be voted by Australian ballot. All the voters would have to say was yes they want it or no they don’t want it. Article two was to see if the voters wanted all the other articles. The budget and all the other monetary articles voted by yes I want Australian ballot or no I don’t.

April asked that what the board was telling them the meeting would be in person. David stated that was his understanding and it was stated there were 96 persons on the petition that wanted an in person meeting that’s what should be done.

Danny stated there was a question last time about having addresses and printed names on the petition. He is resubmitting the same petition with signatures, printed names and addresses. There are 96 voters who signed the petition. Danny stated that people were still confused about having Australian ballot. He stated the Board was changing not just this coming Town Meeting, but Town Meetings in the future.

Tim stated that he and a lot of other people thought tonight’s meeting was that the select board would decide whether the March meeting would be done by a regular Town Meeting or by Australian ballot he thought it seemed the board had changed their mind about it. David stated that was never what the board did. Tim stated there was a lot of confusion and this was characteristic of the townspeople’s relationship with the board.

Dennis stated that Danny had submitted a petition of 96 signatures for an in person meeting. He stated that last March there were 190 votes cast. It was the biggest turnout the town has ever had. He stated he would like to see elected officials by Australian ballot and the other articles in person. David stated this argument should be made at a special town meeting. David stated this meeting is to decide whether to have a special town meeting in person or by Australian ballot. Dennis stated that if you want to know what’s going on you should attend the board meetings.

April asked why a special town meeting was needed. David stated the special meeting was never intended to be an Australian vote, but to ask if the voters wanted to have March Town Meeting by Australian ballot or not. April again asked why and David stated it was because of Covid and last Town meeting we had a lot of voters and we don’t know where we’re going with Town Meeting. This is to let the people decide how they want their town meeting to be.

Linda stated a lot of other towns put their meetings off until June.

Sherry stated she wanted to come back to the beginning of whether to go with Australian ballot or not that if we were to do that it would have to be at the next Town Meeting unless there was a special meeting. Sherry stated that at the end of the September meeting Janet asked about a special town meeting in the fall and if that could be done by Australian ballot and she was going to look into that. Sherry stated she would like to make it very clear to the board and everyone in the room and everyone watching the video that act 162 had no intention of giving boards the option to change how towns meet. Sherry stated there was concern that it opened up a crack and could possibly be used in this manner to vote by Australian ballot before the next Town meeting to change it and that’s what this board is doing and she is very disappointed.

Dan asked about the minutes he asked for. The minutes Darlene sent to him were the minutes of the meeting. Darlene stated that nothing went on after the meeting was adjourned, but the board worked on the notice and agenda for the next meeting. David stated that you cannot do any town business after a meeting and there wasn’t any town business. It was simply typing the notice for the next meeting.

Dan asked why the town didn’t follow policy on the purchase of the new backhoe. David stated this should be brought up at the next board meeting.

Kate asked if the special meeting would be held at the school. David stated it was planned to be at the school. She also asked if the town wanted to add to the select board from a three member to a five member board when that should be done. David stated you would have to get a petition and an article could be put on for the next Town Meeting. Tina asked when the petition needed to be turned in. It was stated by January 25.

Bill asked if you have Australian ballot who would guarantee it’s not fraud. David stated the ballot is not supposed to be handed in by any person but the person doing it or two justice of the peace or a husband or wife.

Denise made the motion to have the Special Town Meeting in person at the school. The two articles to be asked are do you want the officers to be elected by Australian ballot at Town Meeting and do you want the other articles to be voted on by Australian ballot at Town Meeting. David seconded.

Sherry asked if the clock for notification would start tonight. David stated it would.

The date of the meeting was discussed. It was decided to have the meeting December 15, 2021 at 6:00pm at the school.

The motion was put to a vote. David and Denise voted yes. Janet voted no. The motion carried.

There was a discussion on if Australian ballot and in person voting could be done at the same time.

Dennis asked how the board was going to notify the voters in town about the Special Town Meeting. David stated the warning is posted, it will be in the newspaper, on the town website, social media, the Athenian and by email.

David made the motion to reimburse Matt for the gas for the leaf blower. Denise seconded. Put to a vote. The motion carried.

Denise asked about the meeting with Scott Jensen. David stated he is coming down to get measurements and look into it then the board will meet with him.

Sherry informed the board they received word today the NIKA review was finished and they are ready to proceed with the Bruhn grant. The Meetinghouse committee is planning a tree lighting on December 5th. David asked if the Bruhn grant knew about the loan from the Rehabilitation fund. David stated it probably should be told to them because the board has to sign the agreement with them.

There being no further business, David made the motion to adjourn. Denise seconded. Put to a vote. The motion carried. The meeting adjourned at 8:02pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Darlene Wyman, Town Clerk