

**SELECT BOARD MEETING MINUTES**  
**7:00pm, February 7, 2024**  
**Town Hall, 557 Main Street, Becket**

**Attendees**

**Select Board (SB):** William Elovirta (BE), *Chair*; Jeff Piemont (JP), *Clerk*

**Absent:** Chris Swindlehurst (CS), *Vice-Chair*

**Staff:** Katherine A. Warden, *Town Administrator*; Beverly Gilbert (BG), *Administrative Assistant*

**Remote:** Lei-Anne Ellis, Al Blake, Rich Peters – Chairperson of the Central Berkshire Regional School District Committee

**Others:** Ryan Eley (Becket Country Store), Maurice “Mo” Vandesteene, John Wing

**1. The Select Board Chairperson will call the Select Board meeting to order.**

BE called the meeting to order at 7:03pm. He indicated the SB was recording the meeting.

**2. Pledge of Allegiance**

BE led the Pledge of Allegiance.

**3. 7:00pm Public Hearing on the application of Becket on Main Holdings LLC dba Becket Country Store for a Section 15 Annual All Alcoholic Beverages Package Store license for operation at 609 Main Street, Becket, MA 01223 (Assessors Map 212, Lot 31)**

BE read the public hearing notice for the above captioned, and at 7:04pm commenced the public hearing. Ryan Eley, the applicant, was present. JP clarified that package store licenses do not allow on-site consumption of alcoholic beverages. BG indicated that Mr. Eley submitted all required application documents. No one submitted comments to the Select Board prior to or during the public hearing. JP moved to approve Becket on Main Holdings LLC dba Becket Country Store’s application for a Section 15 Annual All Alcoholic Beverages Package Store license for operation at 609 Main Street, Becket, MA 01223 (Assessors Map 212, Lot 31). BE 2<sup>nd</sup>. Motion carried. At 7:06pm, the public hearing ended. The Select Board expressed appreciation to Mr. Eley for investing in the Town of Becket.

**4. Select Board to review and possibly vote on Maurice “Moe” Vandesteene’s application to serve on the Parks & Recreation Committee through June 30, 2027.**

The SB reviewed Mr. Vandesteene’s appointment application. Mr. Vandesteene discussed his background with the SB and indicated that he would like to help the Committee promote adult recreation and assist with existing recreation. BE moved to appoint Maurice “Mo” Vandesteene to the Parks & Recreation Committee effective through June 30, 2027. JP 2<sup>nd</sup>: Motion carried.

**5. Public Input (limited to 3 minutes per person, 20 minutes total for this agenda item).**

John Wing submitted and discussed his written request for the Select Board to take action to promote and improve the road safety conditions for pedestrians/bicyclists on Bonny Rigg Hill Road,

where he has lived for seventeen years. Mr. Wing expressed concern about speeding vehicles. He indicated that a "NO THRU TRAFFIC" sign (located at the Algeria Road intersection) has faded. He requested additional signage (speed limit/speed reduction/watch out for children). He would like to see the speed limit reduced. During discussion, BE explained that the state sets speed limits. The town may ask MassDOT to conduct a speed survey (equipment to count cars/trucks/motorcycles), and ultimately, the state based on MassDOT's recommendations would determine the speed limit. Mr. Wing expressed concern about speeding on nearby gravel roads, and insufficient stopping time in areas around curves. BE indicated that Massachusetts does not post speed limits on gravel roads. The town can post advisory speed limit signs (yellow background with black lettering) but Police Officers cannot issue tickets on those. To write a ticket, there must be a regulatory speed limit sign (white background with black lettering). The SB will take Mr. Wing's request under advisement. BG will provide copies of Mr. Wing's request to each SB member. BE indicated that he had brought up to the current Highway Superintendent the need to review/address the town's sign inventory, and it is anticipated that this project will occur during the springtime.

**6. Select Board to review the Town of Dalton's comments/suggested changes to the Central Berkshire Regional School District Agreement. Select Board discussion and potential to vote to provide feedback to the school district's member towns.**

Rich Peters, Chairperson of the Central Berkshire Regional School Committee, discussed the proposed Central Berkshire Regional School Agreement with the SB and Town Administrator.

KW indicated that the Town of Hinsdale, which contracted KP Law to review the regional school agreement, refused to allow KP Law, Inc. to represent the other regional towns regarding this matter. Discussion ensued re: SB's concerns regarding the voting power of school committee, KW stated that the School Committee has 15 members and Dalton, allotted 7 members, does not have control of the 2/3 vote referenced in the agreement. BE brought up that the School Committee exercised its power to mandate a popular vote to fund the new Wahconah High School and many residents took umbrage that this avenue, rather than the Town Meeting method, was employed. The proposed agreement continues to allow a mechanism for a popular vote, and BE asked Mr. Peters to clarify if it is necessary to word it that way. Mr. Peters confirmed that the language reflects state law. The proposed regional agreement, due to the Hinsdale Regional School Agreement Ad Hoc Members' urging, lists a preferred method: town by town vote. Changing the method to popular vote requires a 2/3 majority vote of School Committee representatives. Mr. Peters reiterated that the popular vote must remain an option because it is state law. Mr. Peters explained that last time there was a popular vote, Cummington was trying to leave the district, and due to the high risk that Cummington was essentially a no-vote, the School Committee voted in favor of a popular vote to request funding for the Wahconah High School Construction. Mr. Peters thinks Cummington has resigned itself to remaining in the district and he hopes the district will not find itself in a similar situation.

Mr. Peters indicated that the proposed agreement factors in the current laws. The Select Board indicated that they are not suggesting changes to the agreement.

JP inquired as to how much input towns have at arriving at their share of their assessment, and he spoke to someone who pointed out that when you break it down per student, Becket's share of the

operating budget is much higher than other towns. He stated that he is curious as to why this happens. Mr. Peters responded that each town's required minimum contribution of the school operating budget is prescribed through state law and involves a very complicated formula that factors for each town: the number of students in each district's schools, the poverty level, and the income average. He indicated that MASC has a great tutorial website. KW stated that the formula does not seem to make sense for Becket because Becket is one of the only communities in the district that has such a huge environmental justice area. KW inquired who specifically reviews and calculates the formulas: someone from the school or someone from DESE? Mr. Peters indicated the school does not have a mechanism to say to the state that it does not agree with or questions the amounts they are assessing for the district communities. JP asked if the state may assess a larger amount to a town that has a larger number of students attending a school with a higher degree of expenses (maybe a high school costs more to run than an elementary school). Mr. Peters said he does not think this would be a plausible explanation for the operating budget. During discussion, Mr. Peters agreed with JP that it would not be constructive to ask the school district to reevaluate the town's assessment. Mr. Peters suggested Becket might want to discuss this matter with State Representative Smitty Pignatelli and to State Senator Paul Mark.

Mr. Peters wanted to make sure the SB was aware that the proposed agreement says, Pre-K to 12 (not K to 12). The district is not changing how it operates but is bringing the agreement up to date with the laws and with how the district does in fact operate, not the way it operated back in 1958 when it was written and sporadically updated. CBRSD is a pre-k through 12 district by state law and by state mandate, and the district has been that way for many years. He pointed out that the current regional agreement does not represent what we are doing and that is the essence as to why it is necessary to update it. He does not think the proposed agreement should be controversial.

Mr. Peters indicated that the next steps (the current step is the towns are providing feedback to the committee) entail:

- i. Next week the school committee will vote on the agreement.
- ii. If approved, the School Committee will submit the proposed agreement to DESE. The district will send the towns a copy that is sent to DESE.
- iii. If DESE provides a preliminary approval, the towns will vote at their town meetings to approve the agreement. KW asked if the school would send language for the Annual Town Meeting Warrant Article. Mr. Peters said he thinks so. Mr. Peters advised that 5 out of 7 towns must approve the proposed agreement for it to become the new regional agreement.
- iv. The agreement specifies that there is a five-year simple review and a sub-committee review every ten years, to keep it up to date.

The SB thanked Mr. Peters for attending tonight's meeting.

The SB agreed they do not wish to offer any modifications to the proposed agreement.

## **7. Approval of the January 17, 2024 & January 31, 2024 Meeting Minutes**

JP moved to approve the January 17, 2024 and January 31, 2024 Meeting Minutes. BE 2<sup>nd</sup>. Motion carried.

## **8. Select Board to review Departmental Reports**

BG indicated reports from the Ambulance Department and Building Inspector will appear on the next meeting agenda. JP followed up on a prior discussion to obtain an intern or have the Ambulance Director assist with the Fire Department's reports. KW stated she will reach out to the Ambulance Director. BE expressed concern about venturing down the path of taking on a Fire Chief's responsibility.

## **9. Town Administrator's Report**

KW provided the following update:

- **OPEB:** KW met with Kate Cannie of PARS (Retirement OPEB - public agency retirement rate services). Ms. Cannie is the Vice President of the New England and New York areas. The town had setup an OPEB account in 2020. It has not been funded. The OPEB plan was setup for 60% equity/40% fixed income. KW advised that the town residents voted to establish an OPEB Trust, and therefore the town is required to hold the OPEB funds in a GASB Trust for DOR purposes. KW will forward documents from 2020 to the SB. The town residents vote to establish an OPEB trust. We have to set one up for GASB because that is what DOR recognizes. The OPEB funds that are set up by PARS or any of the other companies that do this kind of work are very specific and must meet DOR's requirements. The town will not have access to remove the funds for another purpose. Town Meeting is not required to fund OPEB expenses. The town will need to wait until PARS's transition from Vanguard to PFM, part of US Bank, (Mercer purchased the Vanguard subsidiary line of business and Mercer does not want government retirement accounts) occurs to fund the OPEB account. It is estimated PFM will accept deposits after May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024. JP suggested for KW to discuss the financial composition strategies (program selections) with Finance Committee, and any interested SB members. BE was amenable to this suggestion. KW too agreed that this is a sensible approach and should have been done 5 years ago. KW stated that perhaps it is not necessary to have all members of the Finance Committee participate since the account has already been established. KW offered to setup a meeting with the SB and Kate, and KW indicated PARS is responsible for preparing the required actuarial projections reported to the auditors. JP indicated that the new MMA Select Board book has a section discussing OPEB. KW reported that she expressed concerns to Ms. Cannie that the actuarial forecasts were quite high and she is open to discussing this. The yearly fees are 0.0034% per dollar invested (for every \$10,000 invested, their fee is \$34). JP stated that it is important to fund the OPEB account because not doing it places this burden on the people in the future. KW pointed out that the town is required to address this, and not kick the can down the road.
- **Ambulance Service** – The Town of Washington requested a Memorandum of Understanding naming the Town of Becket Ambulance Service as their primary service provider effective July 1, 2024. KW will setup the agreement for a contract period July 1, 2024, through June 30, 2025, and it will have three one-year renewal options (Becket and Washington would need to agree to renew, not only Washington) with a 2.5 annual percentage escalator for the \$400 part. JP wants Becket to monitor its Ambulance activity and capacity before agreeing to renew.
- The Town of Otis (grant host community) is preparing an Otis/Becket grant application to fund a consultant to explore regional Ambulance Services.

- KW discussed STAM's (Small Town Administrators of Massachusetts) 2024 Legislative Priorities. On 2/21/2024, the SB's agenda will list: Select Board to review and vote to send a letter to the legislative leaders to affirm STAM's (Small Town Administrators of Massachusetts) 2024 Legislative Priorities.
- The SB gave KW the green light to participate in Berkshire Regional Planning Commission's regional FEMA grant (if awarded town will need to match by 10%, the 10% can include monies realized for selling used radios in good condition, town also receives credits that may be applied toward the 10% for the Town Administrator's attendance at meetings related to this grant) for emergency services radios. If this grant does not come through, KW will place full funding of the radios on the Fiscal Year 2026 Annual Town Meeting Warrant, or on Special Town Meeting Warrant if necessary. KW pointed out that there are 5 or 6 communities that can collectively bid to obtain more competitive pricing.

**10. Select Board's Comments and Announcements**

None

**11. Any other business to come before the Board**

Due to time constraints (it is currently budget/ATM prep season), the SB declined the Wild & Scenic Westfield River Committee's invitation for the SB to schedule a time to attend a W&SWRC 30th Anniversary Presentation (estimated 1 hour slide show, 30 minutes Discussion).

Instead of March 11<sup>th</sup>, the SB will have a joint meeting with the Finance Committee at 6pm on March 20, 2024.

BE brought up the Town Clerk needs to prepare a Warrant for the Constable to post the March 5, 2024 State Primary Election.

**12. Correspondence/announcements**

None

**13. Select Board to review and sign payable warrants**

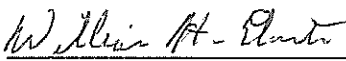
The SB reviewed and signed payable warrants.

**14. Select Board to adjourn the Meeting**

JP moved to adjourn. BE 2<sup>nd</sup>: Motion carried, and the SB disbanded at 8:23pm.

Respectfully submitted,  
Beverly Gilbert, *Administrative Assistant*

Signed by:

 / February 21, 2023  
William H. Elovirta, *Chairperson*                      Date Approved

**Meeting documents:**

- Agenda
- Town Administrator's Report – Select Board Updates with STAM 2024 Legislative Priorities handout.
- Maurice Vandesteene's appointment application – Parks & Recreation Committee
- John Wing's request for the SB to review road conditions/driving habits at Bonny Rigg Hill (spanning intersections Algeria & Quarry Roads) – handed to the SB at tonight's meeting.
- 2024.01.17 and 2024.01.31 meeting minutes