Town of Swanzey, New Hampshire
Board of Selectmen
Meeting – January 15, 2025
Whitcomb Hall, Main Street, Swanzey, NH

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order by Chair Sylvester Karasinski at 5:30 p.m. at Whitcomb Hall, Main Street, Swanzey, NH. Present were Selectmen W. William Hutwelker III, Sylvester Karasinski and James Tempesta. Also present was Town Administrator Michael Branley and Recording Secretary Meagen Kerris.

OTHERS PRESENT

Police Chief Joe Gonsalves, Department of Public Works (DPW) Director Joe DiRusso, Cheshire County Administrator Chris Coates, Garrett Ranney with FACT TV, Jay Ward, Scott Self, Recycling Center Manager Josh Whipple, Fire Chief Eric Mattson, State Representative Jennifer Rhodes, Finance Director Theresa Lounder, Bob DeRocher, Moderator Bruce Tatro, Steve Russell, Michael York, Ben Dreyer from Underwood Engineers, and Dan Coffman.

MINUTES

- The regular meeting Minutes of January 8, 2025, were considered. There was a motion by Tempesta to approve the regular meeting Minutes of January 8, 2025. There was a second by Hutwelker and no further discussion. All were in favor. **Motion passed.**

CONSENT AGENDA

Motion was made by Tempesta to approve the Consent Agenda. There was a second by Hutwelker. No further discussion and all were in favor. **Motion passed.**

- Payroll Manifest
- Payables Manifest
- Personnel Action Reports

PUBLIC INPUT

Department of Public Works Director Joe DiRusso stated the Selectmen that the furnace at the pump station by Powers Generator in North Swanzey died and needed to be replaced at a cost of $4,800. There was an additional failure at the West Swanzey Wastewater Treatment Plant when the existing heating fan couldn't keep up with heating so a larger permanent fan has been installed. This cost is $1,345. These funds will be coming from the West and North Swanzey Sewer Capital Reserve Funds.

Tempesta made a Motion to approve the expenditure of $4,800 from the North Swanzey Sewer Capital Reserve Fund and $1,345 from the West Swanzey Sewer Capital Reserve. Seconded by Hutwelker. All in favor. **Motion Passed.**

State Representative Jennifer Rhodes said she has introduced House Bill 348, which would allow towns and cities to set a minimum timeframe of which someone would need to establish residency to be able to get public assistance. Currently it stands that if an individual needs assistance and is in a town they need to be assisted whether they are a resident or not. There was discussion about legislation last session that allows one community to invoice another if someone moves between towns. Rhodes is looking for a letter of support from the Board of Selectmen which will support this bill, allowing a bit more local control. Scott Self asked if the reimbursement itself is what is changing based on her legislation and Rhodes said no. Hutwelker asked if there was a protection clause in place for having to pay the awarding town back. Rhodes said not at this time.

Rhodes finished up by saying that taxpayers shouldn't be responsible for raising and appropriating taxes to pay for people collecting public assistance who aren't residents. Branley said he would put together a letter or attend the hearing.

PUBLIC HEARINGS

Karasinski called the Public Hearing to order at 6:01 p.m., requesting that all questions and discussion be directed to the Selectmen. The Chair reviewed the bonds being proposed. Branley provided a slide presentation covering the 2024 Tax Rate Breakdown ($19.06 total) and Warrant Articles. He showed a slide saying the town portion is about 27% of the tax rate, with Education and County adding to the tax rate. Branley also noted that the reevaluation happened in 2024 and some commercial projects are expected to help lower the tax rate in 2025.

Warrant Article 1 is Election of Officers

Warrant Article 2 is Planning Board recommended zoning amendments covered by Public Hearings at the Planning Board.

Warrant Article 3 is Zoning Amendment submitted by petition covered by a Public Hearing at the Planning Board.

Fire Station Bond Hearing

Warrant Article 4 is the proposed reduced plan for a new fire station. The Selectmen created a Fire Station Advisory Board in 2024 to work on creating a more project while meeting the necessary needs of the Fire Department and the community. Jay Ward was chair of the Fire Station Advisory Committee and came up to discuss the changes made during the process to cut down on costs to save the town money. The location of the station remains the same as previous propositions to ensure the town wouldn't need to spend money to purchase another piece of land. The committee went to Westmorland to tour their new station that was built to get an idea of costs and layout. The building will have a full sprinkler system, exhaust system, and decontamination area for when the firefighters come back from calls. The bays will have enough room for the fire trucks as they continue to be made taller than they used to be. The administrative side of the department will have accessible offices. KCS Architects developed the design and reduced the footprint by 25% and chose less expensive finishing materials such as wood rather than metal.

The total cost is estimated at $3,500,000 with a $2,500,000 bond, costing the town approximately $160,000 a year in payments from taxes. The remaining $1,000,000 will come from grants and other funds. Bob DeRocher stood up and expressed concern that the station will cost more than what is proposed and suggested taking a bigger bond to cover the difference. He expressed that the town should be aware of the first quote from KCS Architects was higher than what was provided here. There will be an open house meeting for the Fire Station Advisory Committee and opportunity for questions and details.

Steve Russell from Katie Lane discussed his frustration that this hasn't been passed. He shared is experience study diesel emissions and their effect on the health of humans. He stated that he hopes there is a plan to have an exhaust system in place. He also suggested installing electrical outlets during this project for electrical fire trucks as that would be the direction the future is going in. Ward stated there is exhaust treatment in the plan but not electric vehicle charging.

Bruce Tatro from East Swanzey discussed his concerns with the ability to get grants, being aware that the state has expressed the tightening of budgets. Branley assured the funds are currently secure based on their last correspondence, but each year they are not used we run the risk of losing them.

West Swanzey Water Company Purchase & Improvement Bond Hearing
Warrant Article 5 is the proposed purchase and improvement of the West Swanzey Water Company. Ben Dreyer from Underwood Engineers presented their findings for review of necessary changes that will maintain reliable water delivery and provide opportunity for the commercial growth and development in the town. This water company currently serves 400 residents. The system is approximately 60 years old and doesn't have the ability to add on any extra connections for new development. The costs would be $600,000 to purchase the system, $2,500,000 for the new pump house, and $3,300,000 for a new storage tank. Department of Environmental Services is offering a 40% forgiveness on the principal of the loan. This would be calculated off the total cost of the loan. This opportunity with State will most likely not happen again. The impact on the rates of the water system will be approximately $1,000 annually. There would be an approximate $0.05 to tax rate for hydrants. The loan payments won't begin until the project is complete. This warrant article goes hand in hand with warrant article 12.

Barbara Skuly questioned if this passes, would there be another meeting to ratify warrant article 12? The Board of Selectmen are authorized to get the funds from a specific source, it does not allow them to go outside of those sources. Skuly also wanted to know how the current wastewater treatment plant will be able to maintain that extra volume if it is already close to capacity. DiRusso said the West Swanzey Treatment Plant is almost at capacity, but they are working on a study for the need of updates and improvements, regardless of what happens with West Swanzey Water Company. Bob DeRocher said he is in support of this project but believes it needs more time and possibly a committee to do some research. An additional comment from a member of the public stated that he thinks it is weird to have the whole town vote on something that a smaller group of people will be paying for. Karasinski explains that the concept is similar to that of the TIF district.

Mike Faulkner asked if the current water system in place meets current codes. Dreyer said there was a review of the pumps and pipes, the results are located in the report on the Town website. There was no specific need to replace current piping at this time. Faulkner asked what the long term costs to the town will be for perpetual maintenance and Dryer said $6,400,000 will make the system turnkey.

Storm Water Capital Improvement Plan Bond Hearing
Branley and Dreyer gave an overview of this article and the loan with principal forgiveness from the State for a storm water capital improvement plan. At low cost to the Town this plan should help the Town have a better chance for stormwater grants to help fund infrastructure projects. Barbara Skuly asked about the study looking into water quantity and quality and Dreyer said that is correct.

2025 Budget & Warrant Hearing
Article 7 Operating Budget. Overall operating budget increase from 2024 of $738,500 (9.3%). Branley gave an overview of the major increases and decreases. Non-property tax revenues projected to increase $260,000. Net amount to be raised by taxes for budget is $4,391,000, an increase of $478,000. The approximate tax rate impact of this article is $4.37 / $1,000.

Dan Coffman from Swanzey said he thinks an increase like that won't get passed. He said there are a lot of increases this year. He said he will suggest a 1.4% budget increase at Deliberative Session because he thinks this is too high right now.

Article 8 funds capital reserve and expendable trust funds not related to the Department of Public Works. Part of six-year plan developed annually by the Capital Improvement Plan Committee. Total article is $477,500 with decreases to Mt. Caesar Union Library and the Golden Rod Grange Hall. Bruce Tatro asked about the balances in each capital reserve and expendable trust fund and Branley pointed to a page in the handout that shows that.

Article 9 funds public works related capital reserve and expendable trust funds. 2nd of 2 primary articles contributing to Capital Reserve and Expendable Trust Funds. Part of six-year plan developed annually by CIPC. Major increases from 2024 are Covered Bridges and Sidewalks. Article totals $685,000, up $10,000 from 2024.

Article 10 Article saves $300,000 towards a new Fire Station if Article 4 fails or can be used to improve existing stations. ½ funded by general taxation and ½ from the undesignated fund balance. The approximate tax rate impact of this article is $0.15 / $1,000. Same tax impact as Article 4.

West Swanzey Tax Increment Financing District Establishment Hearing
Warrant Article 11 would create the West Swanzey Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District. Swanzey's first TIF District built Safford Drive and will retire in a few years. Branley said last year there was an advisory committee that helped develop this plan. If approved, assessed value increases after 4/1/25 in the district can be used for infrastructure projects or to pay towards future bonds. Primary projects are water line extensions, sewer extensions, or sewer treatment upgrades. This article has no direct tax rate impact.

Skuly asked if North and South Winchester St. are currently residential will be included in TIF? Branley said yes. Skuly said it would change the neighborhood based on the zoning. Branley said it has nothing to do with zoning. Self added that it won't change zoning at all unless town changes it separately. Those properties are included in that district. Self explained that baseline taxes go to General Fund and taxes on increases in value go to TIF. The increase from reevaluation increase goes to the TIF. There was a discussion about how the TIF district will work. DPW Director DiRusso said EPA changes to the wastewater treatment plant's permitting will likely require improvements regardless of increased development. Branley pulled up the map of the TIF district to show where the TIF district would be. Districts can only be so big in acreage and value.

DeRocher asked is the town was leaning to create a new lagoon? DiRusso said no, the planning study is looking and what improvements can be made or if it would be more cost effective to work with Keene. Self said it is unlikely to create a new lagoon and they are inefficient in the size that would be entered. There would be a more mechanical process. It is at flow capacity not design capacity.

Other warrant articles
Warrant article 12 is part of the process under RSA 38 to acquire a water utility. If this article is approved, Town would likely have a special Town Meeting later in 2025 to complete process. Expenses for the water system will be accounted for separately from other Town expenses and paid by user fees.

Warrant article 13 saves $100,000 towards future ambulance costs. The Town's current contract with Cheshire EMS runs through 6/30/26 with rates subsidized by federal funds. Annual payments of $46,865, $67,030, & $81,548. Future expenses after current contract, expected to be over $300,000 per year starting 7/1/26. Funded from the undesignated fund balance. This article has no direct tax rate impact.

Warrant article 14 would Re-adopt the new commercial & industrial tax exemption adopted by Town Meeting 2020. Requires re-adoption every five years. The Board of Selectmen has approved two exemptions under this authorization.

Warrant article 15 is a petition article to increase the board to 5 members.

Warrant article 16 is a petitioned article that would require the Town to have two polling places, one of which at Whitcomb Hall. Appropriates funds for expenses related to start up expenses. Karasinski read an email from Town Clerk Estrella outlining some of the costs and logistical challenges with having an additional polling place. The Selectmen would set the boundaries for the two wards and voters would only be able to vote at their polling place.

Branley showed a summary of the impacts of all warrant articles.

Public Hearing closed at 8:00 p.m. Karasinski recessed the meeting for 15 minutes.

Karasinski called the meeting back to order at 8:15 p.m.

Tempesta made a motion to adopt the West Swanzey Tax Increment Financing District Development plan. Second by Hutwelker. All were in favor. **Motion passed**.

Hutwelker asked the Town Administrator to work with department heads to reduce the proposed budget and the Board agreed.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Tempesta. The motion was seconded by Hutwelker without further discussion. All were in favor. ***Motion passed.*** Adjournment occurred at 8:30 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Recording Secretary Meagen Kerris

Approved on January 22, 2025