

**Town of Haverhill Selectboard  
Haverhill Corner and North Haverhill Fire Department Merger Meeting Minutes  
January 13, 2020**

**Draft Subject to Review by the Board.**

**Board Members in Attendance:** Chair Darwin Clogston, Howard Hatch, Matthew Bjelobrk

**Town Employees Present:**

**Town Manager:** Brigitte Codling

**Finance Officer:** Jennifer Boucher

**Members of the Public in Attendance:** Dennis Fournier, Rich Clifford, Doug Dutile, Albie Estes, Mike Lavoie, Shawn Bigelow, Ed Ballam, Phil Blanchard.

When TM Codling started her job here in Haverhill, she had heard that some residents were interested in a merger of Fire Departments. There was a public forum held in April 2018 and a report was published. This report talked about both highway department and fire department mergers. The Town is considering, in the future, cohabitating emergency services into one facility. So, they need to think about who will be apart of that for size and location.

Some residents are on the fence and would like more information. However, many residents are already in favor of merging the Fire Departments in Haverhill Corner and No. Haverhill and want to get things rolling; stating they have to start somewhere. Chair Clogston mentioned that a warrant article was put before the voters last year in all fire precincts and in Haverhill Corner it was a unanimous vote in favor, and the vote was also favorable in No. Haverhill. In Woodsville he believes the article it failed, but he was not certain.

Woodsville was not invited to this specific meeting, because they had previously stated they were not interested in merging their Fire Department. So only the two fire precincts interested in talking about merging their fire departments were invited to this particular meeting.

A topic was brought up regarding departments billing for inspections and how to make sure the fees are being collected by the town offices. Then making sure the departments are payed. Chief Blanchard made the statement that the fire departments should not be collecting fees at the house they are inspecting. The whole process should be a lot simpler. To this the Town agreed and it was also agreed that this should be an process worked on in 2020.

It was also discussed what the leadership of a merged fire department would look like. Some thoughts raised were, how do we ensure the new department has proper leadership. The group agreed that merging would eliminate overhead and help to create consistency. In the end, the Fire Districts / Precincts would have to “relinquish” the fire departments to the Town and keep the water department for their individual precincts. Mr. Ballam, who is the assistant Chief of Haverhill Corner, had a concern about the lack of Woodsville’s participation in this whole thing. He stated they are a huge part of this Town and that by merging two of the three fire departments you would create two separate fire departments, which can create major problems and messes down the road.

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TM Codling reminded Mr Ballam that Woodsville has been very adamant they will not merge their fire department, and that shouldn't stop this from moving forward if that is what the people of the precincts in North Haverhill and Haverhill Corner want.

TM Codling says by putting articles on the warrant the people will have the opportunity to officially tell us what they want. After which, if there is a favorable vote, a committee would be formed to help with organizing the new Fire Department. That committee would help to develop the organizational structure, transition plan, new budget, etc. for the new department. Things need to be mapped out, right now this is just discussion. Some questions the committee will evaluate might include; what does it cost the town now for both stations and what would it cost the town if there was just one station? Is their going to be a full time chief? What would a new station look like? Would it include EMS or dispatch? TM Codling is looking at this as a 5-year plan, maybe a quicker transition depending upon the new facility and the committee's work.

TM Codling, stated that naming specific names isn't very helpful because the time it will take for this is unknown and many things can change in whatever the time span is. You want the new committee to focus on positions, duties, and responsibilities. Not specific people, but strong leadership will be needed, because the Town relies heavily on volunteer firemen.

Mr. Ballam stated that by putting out an official plan with costs and positions might bring Woodsville into the fold. Not having Woodsville starts to create a mess in trying to pull into other districts, such as Mt. Lakes. To that it was stated that No Haverhill FD serves Mtn Lakes.

Mr. Dutile stated that they should not be looking at this specifically for saving money. "You need to walk before you run." He says that this merger would be beneficial and they should merge and then see where they can make things more efficient and save money that way.

Three (3) separate warrant articles would need to be presented. One (1) for each precinct to relinquish their fire department and then one (1) for the Town accept each Fire Dept.

It was stated that everyone is trying to create one solid, unified town but with Woodsville not cooperating it doesn't look like that will come any time soon.

A statement was made that, "We need to keep in mind our people, because many guys have been on the fire department for 30 plus years but are still uncertified. So, those guys need to be told what is happening and when and what the criteria are. This is so that if they do need to get certified they know the timeline so they can get certified in time and they are taken care of."

Mr Ballam reiterated that "Woodsville needs to be brought in to make things easier and to many it almost seems like a deal breaker." TM Codling stated that "it would be nice if Woodsville would participate, but not a deal breaker."

Mr. Blanchard suggested that we find out exactly why Woodsville won't join and then we can go from there. The communication on when the meeting was wasn't the best and Woodsville was asked to join but miscommunication seems to play in a bit.

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If the Town and precincts put articles on the warrant, then they still have time after to hold informational sessions before Town Meeting. At these sessions the towns people can come and ask questions and be more informed on what is happening before they cast their vote at Town Meeting.

Goals discussed at the meeting included:

- Eliminate duplication of services
- Ensure consistency
- Improve training opportunities
- Reduce overhead / costs
- Streamline management of fire services
- Ensure continuity of service
- Improve the level of service provided

Considerations discussed regarding logistics of merging:

- Cost savings to taxpayers
- Location of merged department
- Leadership at the department level
- Leadership at the Town level
- Overall organizational structure
- Transition planning needed
- Committee to be formed
- Ensure all residents have a say

Next Steps:

- Town of Haverhill ready to put forward a warrant article.
- Haverhill Corner Precinct ready to put forward a warrant article.
- No. Haverhill Precinct to discuss as their next meeting 1/22/2020 and decide whether to put forward a warrant article.
- Warrant articles to be drafted; one for each of the Precinct's annual meetings and one for the Town annual meeting; let the public decide.
- The Group will meet again after 1/22/2020 to include Woodsville Precinct.

*Minutes Provided by Alex Collins*