

**Town of Haverhill**  
**Select Board Work Session**  
**MINUTES**  
**Tuesday, September 6, 2022, at 6:00 PM**  
**R. E. Clifford Memorial Building**  
**65 South Court St.**  
**Woodsville, NH 03785**  
**Or on ZOOM**

**CALL TO ORDER:** Chair Fred Garofalo called the meeting to order at 6:00 PM.

**Select Board Attendance:** Kevin Knapp (Here), Katie Williams (Here), Mike Graham (Here), Vice Chair Steve Robbins (Here), Chair Fred Garofalo (Here). A quorum was met.

**Town Employees Present:**

**Town Manager (TM):** Brigitte Codling

**Assistant Town Manager (ATM):** Jennifer Boucher

**Members of the Public Present**

***In Person:*** None.

***Online:***

Alex Nuti-de Biasi (*Journal Opinion*)

Angel Larcom (*Littleton Courier*)

**PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

**WORK SESSION FOCUS: Public Relations Policy (second reading)**

Chair Garofalo asked the Board if they wished to have him read the entire policy, and the members responded that they had read the text.

**Discussion:**

- Vice Chair Robbins stated that it looked good.
- Nuti De-Biasi commented as follows: “This policy is intended to restrict or manage contact between the Select Board and Town employees and the media, which is at best counterproductive and at worst anti-transparent. It is onerous to ask staff to comply with a three-page regulation that, basically, regulates conduct and interactions between the staff and members of the public, which is what we are as members of the media. It does not seem like a very friendly or natural way of conducting business or interacting with people in the community. I think these policies also tend to alienate us in the media by creating friction and stifling the flow of information, particularly outside of Select Board meetings, and just doing regular business. If you have to constantly refer to a policy, I don’t think it’s really sort of healthy way to have human interaction. Finally, I think the big point that I wanted to make is [about the] unintended consequences of having policies that regulate conduct between staff, employees, and members of the media is that it will probably end up resulting in more 91-A requests and open records requests. I think [that] no one wants that. I have a few other points to make about the policy I was given a draft of before tonight, but those were some general comments that I wanted to make about the policies.

Since I have the floor, I'll just keep on talking. I did read the policy before the meeting, and one thing I wanted to point out that just sort of hopefully illustrates some to the points I have just made. There was one point that addresses [my points]. 'Town employees and volunteers should only accept an interview with the media, or respond to requests for comment by the media, when given express authority to do so by Town Administration' [Public Relations Policy, p. 1, A, paragraph 2, lines 1-3]. This creates an absolutely absurd scenario where if I am sending a photographer to the Polar Plunge to take photos and he or she asks Sherri Sargent how things [are going], and we did not get prior approval from Brigitte or Jennifer or from whoever to get Sherri to talk to us. This is sort of a silly scenario. That is how I see some of these things playing out. And, later in the section using the Polar Plunge as a scenario, [the policy reads] 'Additionally, any comments shall focus only upon the employee's area of expertise.' If Brigitte or one of the police officers happens to be there, and I ask, 'How did it go?' Will she [or he] have to defer to Sherri on that subject? These scenarios are absurd. I have other things to say, but ... I'll stop there for now."

- Williams responded that she understood Nuti-de Biasi's points, so maybe the policy could be reworded. Williams noted that it would not be fair for Sherri to not be able to comment on a recreational event. Graham noted that the numbers of participants are factual statements.
- Vice Chair Robbins noted that he did not see this as an event-by-event policy and stated that the intent of the policy is "so that we [the Board] and the Town Administration put out unified information."
- Knapp stated that employees should know the policy that information goes through Administration.
- Williams stated, "[She] strongly disagrees with the statement that we are being less transparent. I think that is absolutely false." Williams noted that she feels the policy is making sure we are giving out facts, and it improves transparency.
- Nuti de-Biasi responded that the consequences to the policy will make it more challenging for Town employees to interact with the media and members of the public because they have to consistently refer to the policy as to whether their interactions comply with a "dictate" from Town Administration.
- Williams stated that making policy is the job of the Select Board.
- Nuti de-Biasi replied that the issues from the 5,500 residents of Haverhill do not reflect the issues from Wyndham with 60,000 residents, which is what this policy is based on.
- Williams asked TM Codling which employees are currently talking to the media.
- TM Codling replied that Town Administration, Welfare Department, Police Department, Recreation Department, and Fire Department often do.
- TM Codling noted that the concerns that she has heard from staff are about them trying to decide what is appropriate, and it makes them uncomfortable. Vice Chair Robbins read "[To ensure] factual [information is] void of opinion and consistent with the Town's mission and vision and leadership's known position on the subject."
- ATM Boucher noted that the Welfare Administrator may be asked what is good for Haverhill.
- Vice Chair Robbins noted that the Select Board is trying to unify information and not express opinions.
- Williams suggested that department heads have more leeway in providing press releases.

- TM Codling noted that there should be a policy that guides them, but we should have trust in their knowledge of the issue and ability to appropriately respond.
- Graham stated that it is an issue of facts v. opinions.
- TM Codling stated that this policy as written has Town Administration going to the Select Board for permission and employees (department heads) going to Town Administration for permission before responding to the media.
- TM Codling continued that the department heads should not need to get permission from Town Administration to give factual press releases or have press interactions void of personal opinion.
- Williams suggested email press interactions, so words do not get misconstrued.
- Nuti-de Biasi responded that “offence is definitely taken.” Nuti-de Biasi continued, “We have made mistakes before, but we can’t learn from the mistakes ... unless you bring them to our attention.” Nuti-de Biasi noted that the idea that [the media are] deliberately taking what is said at a meeting or during an interview back to the office and twisting it into something we can make hay about is ... ludicrous because we are only as good as our credibility.”
- Vice Chair Robbins thanked Nuti-de Biasi for his input and stated that this policy is not intended to be a “gag order.”
- TM Codling brought up the phrase in the policy of “leadership’s known position” stating that this could be reworded to “if leadership’s position is known,” which would help clarify what is known and what is not.
- Chair Garofalo stated that we have free speech, and he feels restricted by this policy and suggested changing the title of the document.
- Vice Chair Robbins reiterated that the intent of the policy is for the Board and Town Administration to be unified in providing information to the media.
- Knapp stated that the policy should reflect that the Board trusts the Administration and the Administration trusts the Department Heads to disseminate information to the press.
- Graham noted that it was not the intent to limit the interaction with the press.
- Nuti-de Biasi stated that the policy may be revised after tonight’s meeting and any additional comments will be withheld until the revisions are seen.
- TM Codling noted another internal comment reflected that people agree with some “facts” and others “disagreed” with them, and that needs to be recognized.
- TM Codling asked the Board about next steps. Vice Chair Robbins suggested TM Codling prepare another draft, and, at the next regular meeting, the Board will decide if another work session is needed.

#### **COMMENTS OF SELECT BOARD MEMBERS:**

**Knapp:** Knapp asked if the Facebook page could announce the meetings for meetings. Knapp noted that he cannot use the website calendar from his phone.

**Williams:** Williams suggested making the calendar on the Town’s website larger and paste the calendar or a link on the Facebook page.

