

BOARD OF SELECTMEN MEETING
Minutes of September 23, 2020

CALL TO ORDER: Chairman Ross McLeod called the meeting to order at 4:30 PM. Selectman Bruce Breton was present in the meeting room along with Town Administrator David Sullivan. Selectmen Heath Partington and Jennifer Simmons were present via Zoom, and Selectman Roger Hohenberger was participating via telephone.

Mr. McLeod opened with the Pledge of Allegiance, then read a statement relative to the Governor's Executive Order 2020-04 #12, which authorizes the Board of Selectmen to meet electronically provided public access is available via telephone or electronic means, followed by the phone and text message numbers and email address available for use by the public during the meeting. Mr. McLeod then conducted a roll call of the members, as well as several Searles Trustees who were conferencing in, each of whom advised they were doing so alone.

Mr. McLeod noted there was one item on the agenda, which was a request for use of the Searles School and Chapel for a Pop Up Art gallery.

Dianna Fallon, Friends of Moeckel Pond, explained that their Pop Up Festival was scheduled for 10/3, with artists booked, some a year in advance. She indicated the Friends have been preparing for COVID, having secured masks and hand sanitizer, and will be monitoring vendors as far as people touching products. Ms. Fallon advised she will also be standing outside to ensure that hand sanitizer is used before entry, and will conduct an ongoing count to ensure the 50% occupancy is maintained; adding non-damaging discs have also been obtained for the floor to ensure social distancing inside.

Ms. Fallon went on to note that Neil Fallon and Patty Crawley have organized the artists and will assist in monitoring the building; using walkies, if necessary. She explained that there are some vendors who could go outside, however, a significant amount of the items are fine art that cannot be exhibited in a tent. Ms. Fallon reiterated they are concerned about COVID, and do not want to put the artists or customers at risk; but she feels confident with her and Ms. Crawley's experience at similar events.

Betty Dunn, Searles Trustee, noted the Board's decision two weeks ago had been that there would be no indoor events at the facility for that period of time, and it would be discussed again on the 28th; adding the upcoming calendar had been consulted at that time. She indicated that the Trustees had since, in light of the cluster of cases at the High School and lack of information about other cases, made a decision that the best course of action was to not book any more events through the end of the year; based both on an inability to know what was coming and to monitor events. Mrs. Dunn indicated the Trustees will evaluate in December what to do after the first of the year.

She went on to note that the Pop Up Art Gallery was the last event on the calendar, and the one the Trustees had been most concerned about, and it had been the Trustees' consensus to advise the Friends that they could either move the event outside or postpone it; adding it was a terrible decision to have to make, but it was what the Trustees were left with.

Peter Griffin, Searles Trustee, added that the Trustees feel awful, as the Gallery has been a staple for both the Friends and the Searles; adding Mrs. Dunn's summation was correct and the Trustees debated for some time before reaching a decision.

Mike Mazalewski, Searles Trustee, concurred the Trustees were acting out of an abundance of caution based on the Selectmen's decision; feeling it was prudent to cancel all events. He indicated that, though they were not happy about it, the decision made sense.

Lengthy discussion ensued amongst the members as to the Board's previous motion, the outbreak at the High School, other functions at the facility that were cancelled, precautions and monitoring at events, and whether this decision should be deferred to the Trustees.

Mrs. Dunn clarified that she would, personally, like the Board to make the determination; adding the appeal is being made to the Selectmen and the Trustees have already gone back and forth on it quite a bit. She noted that this is beyond the scope of anything the Trustees thought they'd be taking on; adding she would not be upset if the Board overruled the Trustees and allowed the event, citing the Board's previous confidence in supervision at the Senior Center. Mrs. Dunn noted that there are currently only two other events scheduled, both of which are Helping Hands events that are similarly, very controlled situations; adding that construction has begun which further complicates outside events. Mr. Griffin echoed Mrs. Dunn's sentiments; adding the Trustees made a decision which is being appealed to the Board.

Kristy Kadish, Searles Coordinator, clarified that the Gallery contract was signed on February 18, however, because it is an annual event the conversation has been ongoing for a while. She went on to note that cancelled events are money out of her pocket, as well as disappointing given she is hired to promote the Searles. Mrs. Kadish indicated, however, that had the appeal come in last week she may have felt differently than now, as currently she is home quarantined with her Golden Brook student; adding she struggles to think that the Town would allow gatherings in Town buildings yet the children cannot go to school.

Further discussion ensued regarding the appeal, COVID concerns - with Mr. McLeod citing several person experiences with same - the Trustees' decision versus the Board's, the Senior Center versus the Searles, and the possible Board responses.

Mr. Breton then moved and Mrs. Simmons seconded to maintain the Selectmen's decision of 9/14 prohibiting the use of Town buildings. Discussion ensued in that the motion, as stated, would only uphold until the 28th meeting, as well as the intended frequency of facility discussions and the date of the Gallery.

Mr. Breton amended his motion to maintain the Board's decision of 9/14 until 10/3. Mrs. Simmons confirmed her second.

Further discussion ensued regarding Helping Hands use of the building and a request by the Police Department to utilize same for training; as well as governmental versus private uses.

Roll all vote – all “yes” save for Mr. Partington and Mr. Hohenberger; both of whom were opposed.

Mrs. Simmons clarified her support of the motion was based upon a lack of fairness to other events that were cancelled.

Barbara Coish approached noting that she had heard that, beginning next week, the Scouts and Men's Volleyball will be taking place in the Middle School. Brief discussion ensued. No decisions were made.

Mr. Hohenberger moved and Mr. Breton seconded to adjourn.

Ms. Fallon extended thanks to the Board for providing them a fair hearing; noting these are extraordinary times.

Roll call vote – all “yes”.

Meeting was adjourned at 5:15 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Wendi Devlin, Administrative Assistant