Town of Bowdoinham

Solid Waste Committee

July 8, 2020 (Virtual) Meeting Minutes

Attending: Bryan Benson, Cathy Curtis, Lisa Wesel, Tessa Kingsley,

Patrick McDonough, Susan Drucker, Michael Smith, Susan Brown, David Berry, Jeremy Cluchey, Peter Lewis.

1. Meeting called to order at 5:30 by Cathy Curtis.

2. Introduction of members and brief explanations of each member’s reasons for being on the committee.

**OLD BUSINESS:**

1. Cathy Curtis asks for approval of the minutes from July 8.

 a. Susan Drucker asks Bryan Benson for clarification as to whether #5 plastic earns revenue for the town; Bryan Benson says that it could be on a small scale if it were sorted out, but that #2 natural (clear) plastic is basically the only plastic that is worth sorting.

 1. Lisa Wesel asks why we don’t sort recyclables at the barn. Bryan Benson explains there are weight requirements for each material, that we would need storage, and that there would be trucking fees; he wonders if the effort would be worth it. Lisa Wesel suggests that we wait until we have the tour of the barn to discuss this more.

 a. David Berry explains that sorting materials at the barn would be labor intensive and expensive, but the residents could sort out the materials that earn revenue (i.e., #2 plastic, metal, etc.) before bringing them to the barn.

 2. Susan Brown asks whether we can compile a document of which recyclables earn the town money and which don’t, and if there is a way to find out weight requirements for each; Bryan Benson says we have a list of the moneymakers, and as far as weight requirements, he could call some brokers.

 a. Susan Brown explains that she didn’t want to add to Bryan’s responsibilities and that maybe it could be something a committee member could do.

 b. Cathy Curtis suggests we don’t make any changes until we have comprehensive documentation about each material we send out.

Patrick McDonough motions to accept the Minutes from July 8th. Tessa Kingsley seconds. Minutes are approved.

2. Cathy Curtis confirms that Susan Brown has been sworn in.

3. Cathy Curtis asks if everyone is able to access the Google Drive documents. Everyone can. Cathy reminds the group that the Documents, Agendas, and Approved Minutes folders are open to the public, but the Draft folder is not.

4. Cathy Curtis asks for confirmation that the committee’s tasks as described in the agenda are correct. Peter Lewis says they are. (See Addendum 1.)

5. Discussion about which draft Mission Statement we should use; suggestion to use the following (also listed under Addendum 2):

“The goal of the Solid Waste Committee is to provide a resource for residents to reduce household solid waste, reuse and repurpose unwanted materials, and facilitate recycling as current markets allow. The Committee strives to seek revenue sources and cost savings for the town by staying current with market trends, and to encourage environmental stewardship through innovative and proactive practices.”

 a. Susan Drucker asks if we could add “Recycling” to the name of the committee (e.g., “Bowdoinham Solid Waste and Recycling Committee”) but Peter Lewis says it would have to be taken to the Select Board as an official request, so the decision was made to leave it as it is.

Lisa Wesel moves to accept the Mission Statement; Susan Brown seconds. Mission Statement is accepted.

6. Discussion of the Expense Account.

 a. Michael Smith asks for confirmation that collection fees to Richard Plummer for curbside pick-up, listed on average at about $4000/month, include disposal fees, or just collection. Bryan Benson clarifies that it is just for pick-up.

 b. Michael Smith asks if the two months that had higher charges (approximately $8000) were when the town stopped charging residents for trash tags. Bryan Benson confirms that it was. He notes that some residents abused the system, putting out 15-20 bags at a time, but that 30% of residents continued to use tags.

 c. Michael Smith asks for clarification about how trash tags and curbside pick-up work together. Bryan Benson explains that Richard Plummer turns in all the tags he collects each month and is paid according to the number of tags. With recyclables, Plummer tallies the number of bags he drops off and the barn staff verifies that number as the bags are opened.

 d. Michael Smith asks where the revenue from the tags go, and how much revenue is brought in from tag sales. Bryan Benson says that all revenue goes to the town’s General Fund and that all bills are paid out from there. Annual sales of trash tags is approximately $60,000. (Note: see Patrick McDonough’s comment (“f”) below.)

 e. Michael Smith wonders if what we charge for trash tags covers the actual expenses of the service the town provides. He says that he was shocked to see the $235,000 request for funds in this year’s budget. Bryan Benson and Peter Lewis explain that the request was based on skyrocketing fees for recycling and that while costs are still climbing, they hope that the actual expenditures won’t come in that high; last year expenditures were $193,000.

 f. Patrick McDonough asks if “User Fees” in the barn’s Annual Report budget refers to sales of trash tags, and if it does, that that revenue is listed at $75,000. Bryan Benson and Peter Lewis agree that the number refers to trash tag sales.

**NEW BUSINESS**

1. Cathy Curtis asks about best day and time for a tour of the barn with Bryan Benson.

 a. General consensus that late afternoon works well. Coordinating that with Bryan Benson’s availability, the tour will be on Wednesday, August 5th at 4:30, which will also be our regular meeting.

 b. David Berry will also offer his insights on the same tour.

 c. Requests were made for committee members to bring their own chair and to wear masks.

2. Discussion of David Berry’s document “A proposal for possible changes in handling recyclable materials in Coronavirus time” (see Addendum 3).

 a. Susan Brown expresses enthusiasm.

 b. Peter Lewis says that the tour would be a good time to go over the details as it would be helpful to see what things would look like.

 c. David Berry explains that there are two parts to the proposal: (1) How to revise collection of materials in order to move people through the building with physical distancing, and (2) Ways to reduce costs, which focuses on an examination of particulars of what we send to Casella.

 d. Susan Drucker asks for more specifics about the idea of glass crushing at the barn.

 1. David Berry explains that the barn used to crush glass in barrels, filling about a barrel a week, and then would sell the barrels. While there currently isn’t a market for glass, the crushed glass could be used a clean solid fill, and there is already a resident who says he can use as much as we can give him. While it wouldn’t earn money, it would still save a good deal on costs.

 2. Susan Drucker asks Bryan Benson whether that sounds conceivable to him; Bryan Benson says that he has concerns over the idea and doesn’t want to discuss it tonight — he will point out some things on the tour.

 e. Cathy Curtis “still” wants to know what materials come in, where they go, and what each material costs the town. Hopes that a committee member can work on a detailed document with Bryan Benson on that.

 1. Bryan Benson says that we have those numbers, and that everything goes to West Bath and then to Lewiston, and that we have no control over where it goes from there.

 f. Peter Lewis asks if there is a different dollar amount for the cost of clean recyclables and whether contamination is part of the cost problem.

 1. Bryan Benson explains that contamination is the problem — but that because all single-stream recyclables from all municipalities get mixed together at Casella, that there is no way for them to offer a different pay scale for clean materials. We can only save money by controlling our shipping costs (i.e., removing glass, reducing weight), not through our contamination protocols.

 a. Lisa Wesel states that it seems like a fairly high priority to inform people to not put glass in with their recyclables anymore, to let them know that it should be considered trash.

 1. Bryan Benson agrees: trash is $88/ton while recycling is $138/ton.

 g. Susan Brown suggests that we all look at Casella’s website. They list five goals that they want to meet which could help guide us.

3. Cathy Curtis asks if there are any public comments.

 a. David Berry asks how complicated it would be for Bryan Benson to find numbers for the total tonnage of material shipped to Casella for the past half year (or full year) and the money spent to have that material accepted, that it would be useful to see an average cost per ton.

 1. Bryan Benson says that from January 1st, 2020, the cost went from $55/ton to $151/ton overnight.

 a. David Berry says that Casella is financially challenged not just because of China no longer providing revenue, but also because Casella had long-term contracts with municipalities that they still had to honor when the financial picture changed.

 1. Cathy Curtis asks if prices are continuing to rise; Bryan Benson says yes but nothing to worry about yet.

4. Cathy asks whether the town has added our committee to their Zoom account; Bryan Benson states that they have.

Meeting is adjourned by Cathy Curtis at 6:40.

**Addendum 1:**

Task of Committee:

a. Overseeing protocols for keeping the Recycling Barn open during the pandemic.
b. Containing expenses for the recycling program and problem-solving curbside pick-up contamination.
c. Addressing the condition of the barn after the Select board has reviewed inspections and reports and discussed their findings with David Berry.

**Addendum 2:**

Mission Statement:

The goal of the Solid Waste Committee is to provide a resource for residents to reduce household solid waste, reuse and repurpose unwanted materials, and facilitate recycling as current markets allow. The Committee strives to seek revenue sources and cost savings for the town by staying current with market trends, and to encourage environmental stewardship through innovative and proactive practices.

**Addendum 3:**

David Berry’s “A proposal for possible changes in handling recyclable materials in Coronavirus time” (submitted to the town on May 8th):

The new coronavirus has shut down activities at the Recycling Barn, adding costs to the solid waste budget and eliminating many disposal options for residents. To reduce expenses, restore full services such as hazardous waste recovery, bulky waste, metals, and other items, and to improve recycling safety in COVID-time, the Town may need to reconfigure what materials it recycles, and how it receives them.

When Bowdoinham’s recycling program began over 30 years ago, the Town collected, sorted, and processed only materials that were marketable. With the advent of zero-sort recycling, the Town decided in the late 2000s to deliver commingled containers (plastic, glass, and metal) to Casella Recycling in West Bath for about $30/ton, saving several thousand dollars annually by eliminating our sorting costs.

Fast forward to 2018-2019, after the Chinese refused to accept shoddy product from the giant, very expensive U.S. sorting facilities. The only way these companies can stay in business, with decreased revenue from sales, is by charging their customers more to use their system. The town is now paying nearly $200/ton to load and deliver commingled containers to Casella. This has eliminated our savings from the move to zero-sort and has instead become a major expense.

With the future uncertainties the COVID pandemic has brought to the recycling world, it seems unlikely big firms like Casella will be lowering their tip fees anytime soon. This proposal will let the Town avoid these fees and restore services and local control.

A system is possible to allow residents to safely drop materials off, and Barn staff to safely process them. The key to this would be to separate the residents from the Staff, with the residents outside the building and staff on the inside.

There are seven windows and three large door openings on the north side of the Barn, each of which could serve as a drop-off location for a specific material - for example, window #1 for clear #2 plastic (mostly milk jugs), window #2 for colored #2 plastic, window #3 for #5 plastic, window #4 for metal cans, window #5 for glass containers, window #6 for newspaper, window #7 for magazines, and the large door openings would serve to collect cardboard and mixed paper. Only these three types of plastic indicated would be accepted. All other plastic containers would go into household trash.

Inside the Barn there would be pallet boxes (barrels for the cans and glass) under each window, to be swapped out by Barn staff as they filled up. The plastics would be set aside until there was enough of one kind to make a bale. Metal cans would be recycled into the scrap metal roll-off container. The glass containers would be collected in barrels and crushed by staff. The crushed glass could be used as fill by the Town or a local contractor. No recyclable materials would go to Casella.

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A major benefit would be that without the trucking runs to West Bath, the town truck would be available at the loading dock for direct deposit of all oversized bulky waste (OBW), loaded by residents instead of staff, who now drag heavy couches and other large discarded items 40 feet along the 2nd floor loft to be dumped into the truck.

Collection of non-recyclable waste, including waste oil, paint, e-waste, waste wood, batteries, and tires would occur in the east end of the building, where the access to the OBW truck is located.

The remaining materials would be handled as they have in the past, with some lag time (2 or 3 days) between collection and baling of cardboard and mixed paper. This would nullify Covid transmission from these materials. All incoming materials would be moved around inside the Barn with pallet jacks, so there would be no direct staff contact.

Curbside recycling should be encouraged, especially because it limits the number of residents using the Barn. Residents would not put out a bag of mixed cans, plastic, and glass, but would put out a full bag of metal containers, or a bag of #2 plastic, or a bag of glass for pickup along with the other sorted materials they might have.

Restarting our recycling program under this format would save the Town the approximately $200/ton that we are paying for trucking and tip fees for the mixed recyclables and mixed paper that we are hauling to West Bath weekly. The cost of processing the plastics would definitely be outweighed by the value of the baled material (currently around $750/ton), and the metal and glass containers could be recycled at little cost. Mixed paper could be baled and stored for less than it costs the Town for disposal with Casella, and future sales of this material would only increase the Town’s avoided cost of handling mixed paper in-house.

Given the uncertainty of a future which may require long term social distancing, opening the Recycling Barn in the immediate future to full use will require separation of the staff and the public. Opening the Barn to receive the same materials that came in when things were “normal” will mean the Town can begin to sell trash tags again, and will no longer have to offer free trash pickup to the entire community. The loss of trash tag income and the cost of free trash pickup have put a serious strain on the solid waste budget, and those costs will keep adding up until the Town can go back to a full-service Recycling Barn.

I would welcome discussion of this proposal with the new Solid Waste Committee and/or the Select board and would be glad to lead a tour of the facility to discuss eventual questions.

David Berry
Solid Waste Manager, 1989-2018