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, Betsy Steen, David Berry, Martha Cushing.

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

2. Motion by Cathy Curtis to approve Minutes from June 30. (Susan Drucker asks for clarification about officer nominations from previous meeting.) Lisa Wesel seconds approval of Minutes. Minutes approved.

3. Old Business:

a. Question as to whether all members have been sworn in.

1. Patrick McDonough states he has now been sworn in; Susan Brown (who had not been sworn in as of previous meeting) is not present to confirm her status.

4. New Business:

a. Lisa Wesel asks Bryan Benson whether it costs the town more to send no-longer recyclable materials to the recycling mill than it would to simply send that material out as trash.

1. Bryan Benson confirms that is the case, particularly glass (due to its weight), and confirms that most materials are not being recycled by the mill.

2. Brief discussion about addressing that problem.

a. Amending list of what residents can bring to the barn (e.g., not allowing materials that are no longer recyclable) and educating residents would provide immediate savings.

c. Patrick McDonough asks if there would be a way to be more responsive to the market:

1. Bryan Benson explains that the mill frequently changes costs so it would be difficult to get the word out to the residents in a reasonable amount of time.

d. Discussion about current costs and which materials bring in revenue to the town and which materials cost the town:

1. Trash currently costs the town $88/ton. Recycling costs the town an average of $145/ton (prices vary); cardboard currently brings in revenue (although there can be a payment lag of up to three months); magazines just became revenue again after a year and a half; #2 plastic brings in revenue; everything else is an expense, especially glass.

2. Additional conversation about possibly eliminating glass (and possibly other non-revenue materials) as a recyclable material at the barn and educating the public about the changes.

1. The Recycling Barn’s Facebook page (administered by Bryan Benson) is viewed frequently — most posts receive 1300 - 2100 views — which would be one way to reach the public. Tessa Kingsley offers to help with Facebook administration.

e. Lisa Wesel asks about staffing at the barn.

1. The barn currently employs three part time workers, with Bryan Benson having the most hours (20 hours).

f. Tessa Kingsley reads her draft of a Mission Statement (see Addendum 1).

1. Cathy Curtis will put draft into Google folder for committee members to edit as each sees fit and we will discuss at next meeting.

2. Susan Drucker and Lisa Wesel hope that we will include wording about environmental concerns in addition to the town’s costs concerns.

g. Discussion about David Berry’s offer to give the committee a tour of the barn.

1. Patrick McDonough asks why the landlord would give a tour and not the current director.

ZOOM MEETING IS CUT OFF AT 6:10. (FREE ACCOUNTS ARE LIMITED TO 40 MINUTES.) CATHY CURTIS OPENS A NEW MEETING AND EMAILS ALL MEMBERS AND ATTENDING PUBLIC WITH NEW LOG-IN INFORMATION.

Attending: Lisa Wesel, Susan Drucker, Tessa Kingsley, Cathy Curtis, and Martha Cushing. Bryan Benson joins several minutes later. Quorum established.

g. Discussion about David Berry’s offer to give the committee a tour of the barn continues.

1. If Bryan Benson is not on the tour who will overview current operations?

2. Are we touring to view the building’s condition?

a. Agreement that Tony Lewis said we are not being tasked (as yet) to problem-solve building’s condition, that the Select Board needs to review all inspections and etc. and then we will be tasked based on their findings.

3. Cathy Curtis believes that David Berry wants an opportunity to share specific insights with the committee, and that Bryan Benson would like to give him the space to do so.

a. Discussion about having two tours, one with David Berry and one with Bryan Benson. Agreement that that would be a good approach. (Bryan Benson will look into possible limits on how many people can currently be in the building.)

1. Tours should be made public and posted on town’s calendar.

5. Cathy Curtis asks for agenda items for next meeting:

a. Susan Drucker: Review David Berry’s document about future possibilities for the recycling program (see Addendum 2).

1. Discussion about additional ideas for future of program (i.e., adding staff for more sorting; small fee for recycling; volunteer group for more sorting; Community School involvement.)

a. Lisa Wesel asks whether the glass recycling problem will be permanent. Bryan Benson gives an overview as to why glass is no longer recyclable (there are currently no glass-buying facilities in New England, and Budweiser (a former major used-glass buyer) stopped manufacturing glass-bottled beverages).

b. Tessa Kingsley: Review Mission Statement.

c. Tour Dates.

6. Martha Cushing asks to recieve committee documents. Lisa Wesel agrees to send them.

7. Next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, July 22nd at 5:30.

Cathy Curtis adjourns meeting at 6.45.

Addendum 1:

Tessa Kingsley’s Draft Mission Statement:

The Solid Waste and Recycling of Bowdoinham strives to provide environmental relief from landfills while adding revenue to the department by revising accepted recyclable materials on a quarterly basis.  Our goal is to provide a resource for residents to reduce household waste, reuse and repurpose unwanted materials, and lastly, facilitate recycling as current markets allow.

Addendum 2:

A Proposal for Possible Changes to Bowdoinham Recycling Amid COVID-19 from David Berry

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.

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