

August 26, 2020

The Stonington Board of Selectmen held a special virtual meeting on this date at 4:00 p.m. This meeting was also streamed on Facebook live and was available via audio on a conference line. First Selectman Danielle Chesebrough, Selectwoman June Strunk and Selectwoman Debbie Motycka Downie were in attendance. No public or press were present in the room. Public and press were able to view via Facebook live as well as audio through a conference call.

(1) Call to Order

Ms. Chesebrough called the meeting to order at 4:04 p.m.

(2) Pledge of Allegiance

(3) Approval of Minutes

A motion was made by Ms. Downie, seconded by Ms. Strunk and voted unanimously to approve the special meeting minutes of August 12, 2020.

(4) Correspondence

- Ms. Chesebrough took in correspondence from Karin Carlson, RaéVen Kelly Dinwoodie, Elizabeth Kading and Lyndsey Pyrke-Fairchild in the form of an applications for the Board of Police Commission (BOPC). Ms. Chesebrough thanked the applicants for their interest in the Commission.

After reviewing the Town Charter and Ordinance, as well as State Ordinance on Minority Representation, Ms. Chesebrough reached out to the Town Attorney for further clarification on the upcoming vacancy of a Republican seat on the BOPC. She noted that the Town Attorney's previous recommendation to former First Selectman Simmons last year when a Democrat seat opened that the seat should go to another Democrat (since there was only one on the board). The Town Attorney's current advice is to still replace the upcoming Republican vacancy with a Republican as they believe that is in the spirit of the law and that the Board should have at least one representative from each party; however, it is not legally required to do so.

The Board will accept applications from all parties for the BOPC through September 30th with a goal of interviewing applicants during the first few weeks of October at a special Board of Selectmen's meeting. The appointment may potentially occur at the October 28th Board of Selectmen's meeting.

- Ms. Chesebrough took in correspondence from John Truscinski and Donald Kluberanz in the form of an application for the Plan of Conservation and Development Implementation Committee (POCD). It was noted that the terms for all five members of the POCD ended in February. The members were asked to reapply if they were interested and the seats were also opened to new applicants as well. Mr. Truscinski is the only former member to reapply. The other former members including Bill Lyman, Curt Lynch, Stewart Schwartzstein and Fran Hoffman reached out to stated they would not be seeking reappointment.

(5) Appointment/Reappointment/Resignation

Reappointment – Stonington Housing Authority

A motion was made by Ms. Downie, seconded by Ms. Strunk and voted unanimously to reappoint Elizabeth Leamon to the Stonington Housing Authority.

Reappointment – Conservation Commission

A motion was made by Ms. Downie, seconded by Ms. Strunk and voted unanimously to reappoint Ben Baldwin and Sturt Cole to the Conservation Commission.

Reappointment – Water Pollution Control Authority

A motion was made by Ms. Downie, seconded by Ms. Strunk and voted unanimously to reappoint Peter Balestracci to the Water Pollution Control Authority.

Reappointment – Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Commission

A motion was made by Ms. Downie, seconded by Ms. Strunk and voted unanimously to reappoint William Wright from an alternate to a regular member of the Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Commission.

Resignation – Waterfront Commission

The Board acknowledged the resignation of Arlene Whipple from the Waterfront Commission as her term ended and she did not wish to seek reappointment.

(6) Old Business

Update on COVID-19

Governor Lamont's Executive Order 7MM has been extended. This Executive Order discusses the policies for outdoor dining, encroachments and liquor permits. Further, the Planning and Zoning Commission extended their enforcement and permitting policies through the end of the year.

(7) New Business

Resolution – Urban Act Funds [Route One Sidewalk Replacement Program]

The resolution authorizes that the First Selectman can execute and file all information with the State of CT in regards to the Urban Act Funds for the Route One Sidewalk Replacement Project.

A motion was made by Ms. Downie, seconded by Ms. Strunk and voted unanimously to approve the resolution.

The Board thanked all that have been involved over the years to help secure funding for this important project including former First Selectman Rob Simmons, Representative Kate Rotella, Senator Heather Somers, Keith Brynes, Susan Cullen, Jason Vincent and the former members of the Board of Selectmen.

Discussion – Board of Police Commission

Ms. Chesebrough made the following statement:

After speaking in person with Commissioner O'Shaughnessy this week, as well as engaging with people who have served with him, I support him finishing his final year of service on this board. I ask that people attend the Board of Police Commissioners meeting on September 10th and continue to engage going forward to get to know more about this man, as well as other volunteers on this Board.

The online debate over the Facebook postings of Commissioner O'Shaughnessy have further demonstrated a polarizing divide. People I deeply respect have voiced opinions on opposing sides of this debate and I'm left believing that social media is a core part of this problem.

In May, The Wall Street Journal released findings from an internal Facebook probe set to answer a critical question- does Facebook aggravate polarization and tribal behavior? They found the company's algorithms weren't bringing people together, they were driving people apart. The algorithms were set to exploit the brain's attraction to divisiveness in an effort to gain user attention & increase time on the platform.

Beyond algorithms that favor divisiveness, trying to boil down complex issues into short, online commentary is ripe for misunderstandings. People are quick to judge, and less open to listening.

We will continue to be divided if we place higher value on social media than real, in-depth discussion.

Engaging those with different views, even those we may find objectionable is how we can start improving the world around us and I believe as a community in Stonington, we are up for the challenge.

Let's take the opportunity to increase our tolerance and compassion for one another, which is something we all need during this exceptionally challenging time.

Ms. Downie made the following statement:

When I was younger, I was intrigued by a quote from Edgar Allen Poe and it has become a sort of mantra for me "...learn to judge for yourself of what is going on in the world, without trusting to the gossip of others. Believe nothing you hear, and only one half that you see."

Today, we are quick to pass judgement based on a shared social media post or newspaper article without taking the time to talk with or get to know or understand the person. These non-human contact mechanisms are dividing our community. Here in America we are fortunate to have First Amendment rights. I appreciate those rights – through my own and my family's experiences traveling, living, and being deployed in those countries where those rights do not exist. Every day I hear and read opinions that are contrary to what I personally believe. But in this country, the First Amendment gives us the right to voice or share those opinions however, contentious, or divisive they may be. And it is through debate, discussion and listening to all opinions, not just the ones we like, that we grow and move forward as a community.

The Board of Selectmen has policies and mechanisms to appoint and reappoint and accept resignations but there is no mechanism or policy to remove or force resignation. There is no yardstick to judge others by what they chose to share on their personal social media pages. Over the past couple of days, I have met – in person- with Bob O'Shaughnessy, and I met or talked with others who have known him and worked with him for years. While I may not agree with what he, or what others – including people I know well – chose to post on their social media, I will not judge someone based solely on that. I would encourage people to do the same, come to commission meetings, ask questions, and get to know the person before rushing to judgement.

As public servants, we do have work to do. I do believe we need to work to make our commissions and boards more inclusive and more reflective of the nature and diversity of the community we serve. But getting to that place will take time, and to move forward and improve will require personal communication, public engagement, and education – not censure.

Ms. Strunk made the following statement:

As per the Town Charter, the Board of Selectmen have the power to appoint people to boards and commissions. We have the authority to accept resignations. We do not have the powers to remove someone based on a personal Facebook repost. With respect to a repost of Facebook, before judgement is cast, we should take the time to get to know the person. I have known Commissioner O'Shaughnessy for nearly 20 years as our volunteering paths have crossed. More recently, as liaison for the Board of Selectmen (to the Police Commission), have gotten to know all Police Commissioners a little bit better.

The comments said about Commissioner O'Shaughnessy do not represent the person that he is. The comments do not represent who he is as someone who loves this town and all who reside and visits here and they do not represent who he is as a person who believes in giving back and volunteering, which is what he has done for the past 20 years. Before judgment is cast, take the time to get to know the person.

A historical moment that has been overlooked recently is the 100-year anniversary of women gaining the right to vote. Nearly 30 years ago, during the Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill hearings, the pervasiveness of sexual harassment became evident to all. And for the past 30 years, all have been taught of what sexual harassment is as sensitivity training was created in an effort to change behaviors. Today, forms of sexual harassment still exist and I will give you an example. A dear friend recently stepped down from a committee she served on for decades. Her thank you for your service came from a member of the committee who said "thank you for your many years of blond advice" an offensive, sexist and sarcastic remark. However, the person making the comment did not post this comment but rather sent it in a text which is not public or trollable, but sharable. She gave me permission to share this story. And by sharing this story, I am no longer choosing to keep quiet about it.

Someone trolled the commissioner's Facebook page and reposted the post. The trolling itself is disturbing, but social media is here to stay. The social media post and separately, the sexual harassment that still exists, both bring us opportunity. Change is slow but I believe we can do better. I fully support creating social media guidelines for all boards and commissions as well as expanding the application process and personal standards to be considered for both. I support extensive sensitivity training and anti-bias training and making both a condition of appointment and include this for all town employees and elected officials. With input from our town's legal counsel with respect to individuals' constitutional rights, I am confident that we will create an empowered path forward for our entire community.

Discussion – Diversity, Inclusion and Sensitivity

Ms. Chesebrough gave an overview stating that she has been working with the Director of Administrative Services to identify ways to continue to improve on various topics with a focus on creating a more inclusive and welcoming community. Some areas of consideration include training on bias and inclusion for both town employees, as well as Board/Commission members; the feasibility and effectiveness of drafting a code of conduct for Board/Commission members as well as continuing to strive to diversify our Boards/Commissions.

(8) Comments from the Public

None

(9) Comments from the Selectmen

- Ms. Downie encouraged residents to get involved in our Boards/Commissions to include attending meetings to get to know those who are current members as well as to learn more about the Board/Commission.
- Ms. Strunk stated that she will be asking the Board of Police Commission to review the parking issue on Washington Street to ensure pedestrian safety. She noted that she is the liaison to Board of Police Commission. She added that the K-12 Building Committee had the final walk through of Dean's Mill and West Vine Street School.
- Ms. Chesebrough stated that she was honored to participate in the Freedom Forum which was hosted by the Mystic Seaport and Discovering Amistad. The Freedom Forum was the first in a series of events that will take place regionally. The series included a group of panelists discussing race, privilege, oppression and justice in America. In addition, Ms. Chesebrough noted that she is

working on a new video series along with Stacey Haskell entitled Community Connections. The series will include very brief segments highlighting different people, places, organizations and businesses within the community. The series will be released at a future date with the goal of having videos uploaded twice a week on the Town's Facebook, Instagram and You Tube pages. Lastly, a reminder to check voter registration. The State of CT will send mail in ballot applications to every registered voter mid-September. Ballots for the November presidential election will become available on October 2nd.

(10) Adjourn

There being no further business to come before this Board, the meeting adjourned at 4:43 p.m.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stacey Haskell". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Stacey Haskell
Recording Secretary