

**BOARD OF SELECTMEN WORKING SESSION
MINUTES APRIL 2, 2015
APPROVED**

Present: Joshua A. Degen, Chair; Anna Eliot, Vice Chair; Stuart M. Schulman, Clerk; Peter S. Cunningham, Member; John G. Petropoulos, Member

Also Present: Mark W. Haddad, Town Manager; Dawn Dunbar, Executive Assistant

Mr. Degen called the meeting to order at 5:30pm.

Mr. Degen said that they had previously discussed the possibility of having Mr. Jeff Nutting of Franklin in to serve as a mediator to help the work with their working relationship. He said based on the sample questions each Selectmen had drafted, the common theme seemed to be “how their do better to work with one another.”

Mr. Petropoulos said that he found setting an objective was a good way to get there. Mr. Degen agreed adding that they need to learn to work cohesively and learn to accept that they each had different opinions. Mr. Petropoulos said that they also needed to feel confident in other members of the Board. Mr. Cunningham said that they needed to have trust in one another’s actions. Mr. Cunningham said that their relationship with the Town Manager was important and following the policies and procedures in place and allow the Town Manager to administer them. He said that they needed to recognize the people working for them in Town were all professionals and be careful with how they conduct themselves. Mr. Cunningham said that they needed to abide by the policies and procedures in which they had set and be respectful in how they address one another. Ms. Eliot said that they were not listening to one another and thought they should take the opportunity that day to listen to one another. Mr. Schulman said that there had always almost been disputes and disagreement within the Board. He said that there were five (5) of them and there will be disagreements. He said it was more in how your being adding that respect goes along with disagreement. Mr. Degen said that he heard what was being said but when aspersions of collusion had been cast more than once, he could not let it go. He said that he was accused of something that he had not done and was still waiting for an apology from Ms. Eliot. Ms. Eliot said that if Mr. Degen had a question about her, he could have come to her and not talked about her to other members.

Ms. Sheila Harrington said that she had dealt with a common situation in the House of Representatives. She said that she was a trained mediator and handled mediation on behalf of the representative’s caucus. She said that she was there to give the Board the benefit of seeing how she saw things and how she dealt with them. Ms. Harrington said that they were all elected officials and needed to find a way to work together. She said that throwing each other under the bus, pointing fingers and feeling like you’re going to be backstabbed were things that needed to have a third party mediator come in to help. She asked the Board to take the Four Corners video as an example. She asked what motivated Ms. Eliot to do a video; to inform the public. She said that it was not evil of her to do that adding it was a benefit to the people. She said that it was a safe environment in mediation where there was no finger pointing. She said that barriers had been put up between one another and as a group trying to work together; they needed to be able to trust one another. Ms. Harrington said that they needed to set ground rules, things you do and shouldn’t do adding that going to the press and blogs was not the way to do this. Mr. Cunningham agreed adding that Groton had a hyperactive press and thought the press added fuel to the fire. Mr. Degen said that everyone one of them, with the exception of Ms. Eliot, had written a letter to the press in the past six months and thought that certain things needed to get out through the press. Mr. Cunningham said that that was not he was hearing from Ms. Harrington. He said that grandstanding in the press was what was causing the harm.

Ms. Harrington said that they needed to be able to trust one another and the infighting should not be part of what they do. Mr. Degen said they were doing the things they needed to be doing. Ms. Eliot said that the press didn't recognize that. Mr. Degen said that there were distractions, but things were getting done. Mr. Degen said that he thought they needed a mediator but needed to define their objective. He said there were a lot of interactions at a lot of different levels. He said that reality gets in the way of guidelines. Ms. Harrington said that they were in a weird position of needing to communicate with each other and being limited in doing that. Ms. Harrington suggested that that look for a mediator through the MMA, someone with experience with municipal boards. She said that a mediator would take on a cloche of neutrality adding she wouldn't pick someone local who knows what's going on in Groton. Mr. Cunningham said that the name of the mediator on the table was from the MMA.

Mr. Haddad said that the mediation would need to take place in public session. Ms. Harrington wondered if there was a way that it didn't have to be. Mr. Petropoulos said they could ask the AG's office. Mr. Cunningham said that if they assume the answer from the AG's office is no, they were going to have to find out how public mediation would work. He said they would have to act professional with one another, not grandstand on certain issues and feel confident that no one was working behind the scenes or leaking info to blogs or local newspapers. Mr. Petropoulos said that it all came back to how they were being. He said that they could follow guidelines and still slip. Ms. Harrington pointed out that she was the only one in the room that wasn't from the press. She said that they needed to figure out how to clear up the hurts before the next meeting. Mr. Petropoulos said that there was no end to the investigations, PIR requests, accusations of collusion, etc. He said they needed to admit to their mistakes and start over. He said they couldn't enter into mediation with calls for resignations still out there as an example.

Mr. Degen said that he was a very reactive person and when accused of something he didn't do, and there had been many accusations over the past six months, he was not going to sit back and take it. He said there had been a lot of undue stress, distrust and animosity amongst them. Mr. Cunningham said that despite the mellow drama, Groton was a great place to live. He said they did not have a budget deficit and they had a AAA bond rating all things which received no media coverage. He said that they also had generally good management of the Town and that they needed to remember that. Mr. Cunningham said there was so much more that went on that important to the residents that doesn't get reported on which was a real shame. Mr. Harris said that he disagreed with Mr. Cunningham as a member of the press. He said that he thought the Selectmen needed privacy for mediation and thought they could maybe ask the press not to report on it. Mr. Petropoulos said there was plenty of mistrust in the press but thought they were looking out for what was best in Groton. Mr. Schulman thought that maybe the media should be included in the sessions. He said that he didn't trust the Groton Herald adding he didn't think they attempted to go out and get the information. He said he would like to be able to trust them to report correctly someday. Mr. Harris said that he felt like they were honorable adding that reporting the news was not always pleasant. Mr. Schulman said that he trusted their honorable intentions but not Mr. Harris. Ms. Harrington pointed out that the lack of trust was the problem adding that they needed to create a safe environment where they could express their feelings and talk.

Ms. Eliot asked if they could conduct business during business hours adding this was one little way they could focus on business at hand. Mr. Degen said he didn't see anything wrong with sending emails. He said if he had an email to send, he was going to send it. Ms. Harrington asked if Ms. Eliot felt like it was done in a fit of anger. Ms. Eliot said she didn't know why this was being made into an issue. She felt as though email on the weekend that could wait until Monday was disruptive and asked that it be kept to best business practices. She added that emergencies were different. Mr. Petropoulos said that feelings should be abided by. Ms. Eliot said that there was always the expectation that something be done outside of normal business hours. Mr. Schulman said that he agreed with this adding that undue stress was not reasonable. Mr. Petropoulos said that with a

volunteer board it was unlikely that would happen. He said that weekends and evenings are when they do most of their work. He said he understood what Ms. Eliot and Mr. Schulman were saying but added that he didn't expect a response at 9pm at night to an email he may have sent. Ms. Eliot said that there had been some criticism that answers were not being given in a nano second. Mr. Cunningham said that he could respect certain boundaries adding that they needed to respect the boundaries of the Town Manager also.

Mr. Degen said that what he was hearing was that they needed to work together in a cohesive and respectful manner adding he thought their last meeting flowed well. Mr. Schulman said that they needed to reach out to the AG's office also. Mr. Haddad said that when he spoke to Mr. Nutting, mediation could not take place privately. Ms. Eliot said that Ms. Dunbar had not received authorization to send their questions to Mr. Nutting also. Mr. Degen suggested that they re-send Ms. Dunbar their five (5) questions and she could send them to Mr. Nutting to see if he has faced similar situations.

Mr. Petropoulos said that he didn't know how they could go into this with things outstanding. Mr. Degen said he would be willing to put things in a bowl and burn it if all six (6) of them did. Mr. Petropoulos asked Mr. Degen if he would publically retract his request for Ms. Eliot resignation. Mr. Degen said he would under certain circumstances; if he knew he wouldn't be accused of something again.. Mr. Schulman said that there was no point in mediating then. Mr. Degen said that since he had made his statement he had been accused of other things and was not ready to take the leap of faith. Mr. Petropoulos said he was asking Mr. Degen to lead them. Mr. Schulman reminded Mr. Degen that he was the Chairman. Mr. Cunningham said that there were maybe things underneath that they could not let go of yet. Mr. Schulman said that despite all of this they were working as a group and moving forward with things like Town Meeting. Mr. Degen said that this was all wearing on them, Mr. Haddad, Ms. Dunbar, employees and residents of Groton. Mr. Degen told Ms. Eliot she was sorry that he called for her resignation and did it because of feelings he had. He retracted his request for her resignation. Ms. Eliot said that she accepted is apology adding that they had worked together for many years. Mr. Degen said that it was reactionary.

Ms. Harrington said that she too knew of someone who has done a lot of mediation and could reach out to him. She said that the Board had made steps. Ms. Eliot said that she wanted to start fresh. Mr. Degen said that there were other issues like the letters published by Mr. Schulman and Mr. Petropoulos and the PIR request Mr. Cunningham had made as well as issues between Mr. Haddad and himself. Mr. Schulman said that as far as he could see it, it was over. Mr. Petropoulos agreed. Mr. Petropoulos said that Mr. Haddad had a big thing out against Mr. Degen and himself and asked if he was willing to let it go. Mr. Haddad said that his reputation was gone and his career was over. He said he could not let it go at this time. Mr. Petropoulos asked Mr. Cunningham about the PIR. Mr. Cunningham said that he and Mr. Petropoulos needed to discuss it further adding that he needed a comprehensive understanding of Mr. Petropoulos's actions over the past year. Mr. Degen said that they needed to take things one at a time adding some things were easier to resolve than others.

Mr. Degen asked if April 11th at 10:00am would work for the Board and asked Mr. Haddad and Ms. Dunbar to reach out to Mr. Nutting. Mr. Schulman offered a word of thanks to Ms. Harrington for her advice.

Mr. Petropoulos asked the Board what would make them trust him more. Mr. Cunningham said that honesty in situations and feeling like he was not working behind the Board's back and not leaking information. Mr. Haddad said that he had sent an email to the Board members, Ms. Dunbar, Mr. Bouchard and Town Counsel last week and later that week a PIR had been submitted looking for that email. He said he asked Mr. Bouchard and Ms. Dunbar if they told anyone about the email and they said no. Mr. Haddad said that the leak had to have been from one of the Selectmen. He said that he was not trying to be disrespectful but he was afraid to send the Board emails because information is going to get leaked.

Mr. Schulman said that he echoed Mr. Cunningham's comments adding that he felt like Mr. Petropoulos was going behind their backs with the Personnel Committee as an example. He said that they had to be able to trust one another and find ways of working out their issues. Mr. Schulman said that he also thought Mr. Petropoulos needed to consider people's feelings adding that he was more concerned about doing what was right and not people's feelings. Ms. Eliot said it was hard having your town portrayed as being led by non-honest people. She said it seemed as though his mission was to paint them as being corrupt and underhanded. She said they all make mistakes and she had never done anything dishonest and not in the best interest of the Town.

Mr. Petropoulos said that he hoped that she had never given them to reason to think he thought they were corrupt. He said he had never seen anything illegal or unethical and tells people just that. Mr. Cunningham said that it had come across that way especially with the Open Meeting Law. He said people felt as though they couldn't trust Mr. Petropoulos. Mr. Degen said that 8 out of 10 times he could agree with Mr. Petropoulos but said the way in which Mr. Petropoulos does what he does when he didn't get his way behind the scenes left a bad taste in his mouth.

Mr. Cunningham moved to adjourn. Mr. Cunningham seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

Approved: _____

Stuart Schulman, Clerk

respectfully *submitted*,

Dawn Dunbar, Executive Assistant

Date Approved: 6/9/15