

**Gov-Local**

# Cornish To Hire Road Agent

Wednesday, March 12, 2014

Cornish — Voters at Town Meeting granted the power to hire a road agent to the Selectboard, ending a long-standing practice of townspeople electing a resident to a one-year term in the position.

The measure, which was petitioned onto the warrant for the floor portion of the meeting, passed by a show of hands with 70 people voting in favor. There were about two dozen nays, which were not tabulated.

Resident Heather Meeks was one of several residents who spoke in favor of making the position appointed. She said the one-year term leaves little time for long-term planning, and that hiring someone would broaden the candidate pool.

"I think in the long run it would be better for the town," she said.

The change will take effect in 2015. During all-day ballot voting, residents took one more opportunity to elect the road agent, choosing Wayne Gray for a one-year term.

Voters also decided a contested Selectboard race, which saw incumbent Merilynn Bourne ousted by challenger Dale Lawrence, president of the Cornish Rescue Squad and a former longtime member of the volunteer fire department.

Lawrence won the three-year seat, 237-195. After the results were released Tuesday evening, she said she was looking forward to joining the board.

"I'm looking forward to working with the other two selectmen and working with the folks in town," she said.

During the five-hour floor meeting, which at its peak drew about 100 attendees, residents approved all other warrant articles, some with minor amendments.

Spending includes a nearly \$1 million operating budget, not including the expense of county taxes, and a roughly \$557,000 highway budget.

Bourne had previously said that if all warrant articles passed, the town's municipal property tax rate would increase just more than \$1 to \$3.79 per \$1,000 of valuation.

That translates into a annual tax bill of nearly \$950 on a \$250,000 home, up 37 percent from last year.

After the floor meeting, Bourne said that several additions and subtractions to the budget at Tuesday's meeting would more or less level out, and she expects the impact to the tax rate to remain roughly the projected \$1 increase.

Several voters spoke to the road agent article, which was shot down by voters several years ago when the Selectboard put it on the warrant. Proponents have said having the road agent appointed by the board would allow for a more thorough vetting process, especially as the position evolves and becomes more demanding, and would allow for easier dismissal.

Resident Jim Fitch said he voted to keep the road agent an elected position the last time, but said he's "changed (his) mind on the subject."

"I really think it's time to do a change," he said during discussion.

"I think we can still complain about the roads if you want to, but I think (having a road agent hired by the Selectboard) will help smooth things out in the office," he added.

There were also opponents, including Bill Wall, who suggested that taking away residents' direct choice "in a day when we're having less and less democracy" was a bad idea.

He said an elected road agent is more invested in the position and connected to the community, whereas an

Meanwhile, much of the discussion and residents' questions centered around the police, fire and highway budgets, which are all increasing.

The police budget is up 16 percent compared to last year, largely due to a 38 percent increase in the salary line to pay for additional daytime patrol hours. Previously, the department was staffed primarily in the evenings, and the town relied on daytime coverage from state police or mutual aid, which sometimes has led to longer response times.

Police Chief Doug Hackett said the daytime hours are a response to an increase in petty thefts, as well as an increase in heroin use in the region. Hackett attempted to quell some residents' concerns that the increased hours signaled a move to a full-time force. "This is an attempt to stop needing a full-time police department," he said. The \$84,000 police budget passed in a unanimous voice vote.

The \$44,000 fire budget, up 10 percent over last year, also passed unanimously in a voice vote after some discussion, but residents had more to say about a separate appropriation to raise \$22,000 for the fire department capital reserve fund.

Deputy Fire Chief Paul Whalen made a motion to increase the amount to \$35,000 in order to replace a 1995 fire truck in a few years without depleting the reserve. After some debate, Whalen's amendment ultimately carried in show of hands, 54-41, and the \$35,000 appropriation was then approved unanimously in a voice vote.

Wall also objected to the highway budget, which increased 13 percent to \$556,930, and a separate article to establish a paving capital reserve fund and raise \$50,000 to add to it for paving within the next few years. He made a motion to cut \$20,000 from the highway budget, referencing over-spending on some equipment line items from last year's budget.

Officials attributed over-spending to severe rainstorms and flooding last July, which forced the budget up, although up to three-quarters of those costs are expected to be reimbursed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Wall's motion to cut the budget failed in a voice vote, with a few people supporting it, and the budget as warned passed with a smattering of naysayers.

Wall and Neil agreed that maintaining the town's 23 miles of paved roads was unsustainable. Wall suggested that paved roads with bad foundations be reverted to dirt roads.

Bourne said even if voters opt to go that route during Town Meeting next year, money would still be needed.

"Everyone agrees we've got to do something ... Seems to me it's prudent to put the money aside now," she said.

That article also passed, over the opposition of a number of no votes.

Elsewhere in the meeting, in a 40-31 show of hands, voters approved a petitioned article asking the town to urge the Legislature to call upon Congress to amend the constitution to establish that constitutional rights "were established for people, not corporations" and that money, unlike free speech, should be regulated.

Although supporters pointed out that a similar measure appeared on more than 50 warrants throughout the state, several in attendance argued that the floor meeting was the wrong venue for the question and complained that it should have been on the ballot.

Voters also unanimously approved an article to designate Paget Road a scenic road, and voted to put a question on the November ballot that would open Town Meeting voting two hours earlier, at 8 a.m.

In a nonbinding voice vote, the Selectboard asked townspeople to provide some guidance on whether to allow limited hunting at the Cornish Recreation and Education Area behind the fire station, a roughly 80-acre parcel commonly used for school projects.

Three self-identified hunters in attendance said they felt that hunting was not appropriate for the property.

A supporter of hunting at the property suggested the Selectboard should seek input from a broader cross-section of residents since the question had not been warned.

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#### CORRECTION

The estimated Cornish municipal tax rate of \$3.79 per \$1,000 of valuation would result in an annual tax bill of nearly \$950 on a \$250,000 home, an increase of \$255. An earlier version of this story overstated the amount of the increase.