

Truro Select Board Meeting
Thursday, April 9, 2020
Remote Meeting

Select Board Members Attending: Janet Worthington, Chair; Susan Areson, Kristen Reed, Stephanie Rein, Robert Weinstein

Attending: Town Manager Rae Ann Palmer; Assistant Town Manager Kelly Clark

Chair Janet Worthington opened the meeting at 10 a.m.

The meeting was called to discuss sending a response to a recent editorial and news article in the Provincetown *Independent*. Ms. Palmer commented on a misbelief that the Town had purposely held back information. Truro is still unable to do livestreaming because the needed equipment, a TRMS live-streaming server, is on order but has not yet arrived. She said it was unfair to characterize staff as having been unwilling or unable to have livestreaming up and running under the circumstances. She said that the article and the editorial were very demoralizing to the staff, who have been working hard to get information out to help people. Chair Worthington said she also had considered it demoralizing even though the article had been corrected in the online version of the *Independent*.

Susan Areson read a letter to the editor she had prepared addressing the negative editorial and inaccuracies of a news article in the recent edition of the Provincetown *Independent*. The letter details the steps the Town has taken to keep the public informed about Covid-19, its effect on Town activities and the updates available for all residents. The letter states that Truro has provided all the information that the editorial had labelled malpractice on the part of the Town. The letter also explained the purpose of the emergency declaration, which is separate from the advisories provided by the Health Department and the Select Board to people arriving in Truro. The letter attempts to correct the inaccuracies of the news article on how meetings are being conducted, the missing TMRS streamer server and Ms. Palmer's response to the reporter. The conclusion states the all staff has been diligent in preparing fact-based information to the public and underlines the need for accurate reporting. Ms. Areson said it was her thought that the letter be signed by the entire Select Board or signed individually if they were so inclined. She suggested that they post the letter on the Town website as well as sending it to the *Independent*.

Kristen Reed said that the letter captures what Truro has been doing and rights the wrongs of the article. She asked her colleagues if anyone knew any possible motivation or source for the *Independent*'s depiction of Truro as lagging behind. Chair Worthington didn't know, but she mentioned that this wasn't the first time the newspaper had made unwarranted attacks, citing an instance in January when the editor called Truro "the heart of darkness." She said she had answered that editorial personally. She could not fathom why a local newspaper would not be more supportive at such a difficult time. If they don't have the information, she said, they could call Select Board members in order to publish helpful information. Susan Areson said commentary and opinions come from the editor, who has every right to produce commentary every week. She identified the problem that this editorial called for information which was

already on Truro's website. She said that she was disturbed because the editorial was written based on inaccurate information. Janet Worthington said a phone call could have corrected this. She took umbrage with the editor calling it a case of "malpractice."

Ms. Palmer asked to pause the meeting because she had just received an email that the Channel 18 live TV broadcast had stopped, and she need to contact the IT Director to fix the problem. The recorded meeting was still working, but the meeting paused with Select Board members standing by until the issue was resolved.

Kristen Reed said she wanted to discuss the new inaccuracies, the past negative characterization of Truro as the heart of darkness and what the Select Board and Town could do to prevent this from happening again. She asked if there was a problem with the relationship with the *Independent* that could be salvaged. She asked how the Board might build fences to avoid being attacked on a regular basis. She expressed the hope that the Town could turn this into an opportunity to gain support from the relatively new publication and ask their cooperation in producing material that ultimately helps the public.

Susan Areson, as a point of order, corrected Kristen Reed's references to "a letter." Ms. Areson defined news stories, letters to the editor and editorials in newspapers. Susan Areson said she couldn't ascribe any motivations to the editor's negative presentation of Truro now and in the past. She said the editor was correct in stating that Truro lagged behind other communities with livestreaming technology. That is part of journalism, but it is not okay to print criticism of the Town Manager based on inaccuracies. Ms. Areson said that everyone is trying very hard under the very difficult circumstances. She suggested reaching out to the editor to see if he would like to meet with them. That would be a way to clear the air, see if there was a problem and to go forward supplying information for future stories. The Town also has to be prepared to take criticism if the *Independent* prints stories that the Select Board might not like, provided the stories are accurate, she said.

Robert Weinstein agreed with Ms. Areson's points; however, he did not think it would be productive to meet. He said that the letter would put the *Independent* on notice that the Town was not going to sit by silently when they are presenting inaccuracies. He gave some background on how the *Independent* had been formed and recounted a discussion he'd had with the editor about the importance of responsible reporting. In a time of crisis, the public needs to be given the truth about a situation. He agreed that it is unfortunate that Truro does not yet have the ability to have public participation at meetings, but to extend that to an inaccurate statement that the Town has withheld information from the public is wrong. He noted the increased number of Select Board meetings, the Town's outreach to help people and the staff's exemplary efforts in continuing the functions of government. He mentioned the Orleans message board advising arrivals to self-quarantine for 14 days, which is exactly the same as Truro's message. He said that he considered the newspaper's attack on that message, which is the same one that the state and other communities have issued, highly irresponsible. He said that the Select Board's letter to the editor, communicating through the printed word, was the way to meet. He recommended that the editor and the *Independent's* staff practice responsible reporting through accuracy, fact checking and care about what is being presented to the public.

Stephanie Rein said it was disheartening that this meeting was even being held because this is a time when everyone should be coming together, not tearing each other down. She said that the Select Board has been striving for transparency even in these uncharted waters. The Town employees have been working diligently to help. For instance, Jarrod Cabral delivered the Select Board's packet to her house with proper distancing. She reminded everyone that we live in a rural community where not everyone has the technology to interact with meetings. She did not favor a meeting with the editor but did favor sending the letter, as written, to the editor. She gave thanks to all the Town employees, particularly David Wennerberg, for trying to make the virtual meetings work.

Janet Worthington said she agreed about not meeting with the editor. This would not be a good time for a meeting, she said, and she didn't know how it would help. She was in favor of sending the letter. She said she would be open to a future discussion of meeting with the *Independent* editor, but at this time she wanted to focus on helping the citizens and the Town get through this period of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Susan Areson said any meeting with the editor would have to be face to face, so it would not be possible at this time. She recommended that any further communications with reporters be done in writing. Ms. Palmer said she has encountered a demand from reporters for instant replies, probably more so over the past few weeks. The writer of the news article had called her around a dozen times in three days, including over the weekend, so she has already informed the editor and the reporter that she will be corresponding via e-mail. She said there are always other things that take priority in Town management, but she has been trying to respond to e-mails within twenty-four hours. That's the best she can do, Ms. Palmer stated.

Susan Areson commented that we live in a time when we have to rely on the press to get information; however, we have the ability to get information on our web page. There are people who do not have Internet access who need to rely on the press. Journalists are emergency responders as well, she said. While reporting, they're out there exposing themselves. She's been in touch with former colleagues around the country who are risking their lives getting their stories. The press plays an important role, which she did not want to minimize locally. The Town staff's first priority is to the citizens. She recommended that people check the Covid-19 updates on the Truro website, which is updated every day. She thanked Assistant Town Manager Kelly Clark for the updates. Janet Worthington said that the Select Board members are available by phone or e-mail about anything that is going on with the virus. If they don't have the information, they will get it. Select Board members will respond with whatever information they have, she said. Kristen Reed commended her colleagues for meeting every week, being transparent with the public, getting the minutes out quickly, and posting information on the Town website.

Robert Weinstein moved to accept the response prepared by Susan Areson, send it to the *Independent* and post the letter on the Town website. Janet Worthington seconded, and the motion carried 5-0.

Ms. Palmer said the letter would be sent to the Select Board electronically, and their names would appear on it in the website post. Chair Worthington said the Select Board meeting next Tuesday, April 14, 2020 will deal with many of the questions people have been asking about beaches, short-term rentals and tax payments. Rae Ann Palmer gave some brief updates, one on a question from Ann Greenbaum's e-mail. The Town has been working on signs to remind people about distancing, self-quarantines, non-essential businesses and short-term rentals. The sign locations will include Corn Hill Beach, the Harbor, Great Hollow Beach. The Board of Health has authorized Health Agent Emily Beebe to enforce the moratorium of short-term rentals. She outlined the consequences for non-compliance: notices, fines and court orders if necessary. The Town has begun to verify the identification of health care workers who are staying in seasonal rentals or campgrounds. Assistant Town Manager Kelly Clark is preparing provisions for the postponement of taxes and interest, and senior tax work-off program.

Susan Areson asked what the fine would be for short-term rental, but Ms. Palmer said she will get that information for her. The determination can be viewed on the Board of Health meeting, which is on the Town website. Kristen Reed commented on the unprecedented times we are experiencing and the uncertainty of the end date. The unknown is making it more difficult, Janet Worthington said. Rae Ann Palmer announced that staff is starting to plan to prevent people from getting too relaxed when the Covid-19 situation starts to ease and the curve flatten.

The meeting participants prepared to sign off with wishes for the Easter-Passover season and messages to stay safe.

Adjournment

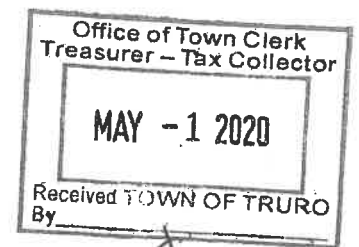
Susan Areson moved to adjourn. Stephanie Rein seconded, and the motion carried 5-0. The meeting was adjourned at 10:41 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary Rogers,
Secretary



Rae Ann Palmer, Town Manager
Under the Authority of the Truro Select Board



Public Records material of 4/9/2020

Letter to the Editor of the Provincetown *Independent* from the Truro Select Board