

Town of Northport
Public Hearing and Select Board Meeting
August 26, 2024 @ 6:15 pm

Chair: Jeanine Tucker
Vice Chair: Breanna Pinkham Bebb
Municipal Officer: Molly Schaffler
Town Administrator: James Kossuth

Finance Director: Vicki Eugley
Road Commissioner: Amon Morse - excused absence
NVC Representative: Janae Novotny

Present: Jeanine Tucker, Breanna Pinkham Bebb, Molly Schaffler, James Kossuth, Vicki Eugley, Janae Novotny, Tinsley Morrison, Ben Block, Patricia Worth, John Worth, Sasha Ray, Maureen Block, Chanelle Cyr, Adam Clark, Mark Guilmet, Jim Dunham, John Pooler, Matt Francis, Otto Francis, Zach Block, Willis Crichton, Ian Fein, Diana Manzanedo, Shelley Fein.

Citizen Concerns: None at this time.

Public Hearing: Block Brothers Custom Cabinets, Community Development Block Grant (CDBG): Tucker opened the public hearing at 6:16 pm. Kossuth introduced Ben Block and explained the reason for the public hearing, which is to solicit public input for the Block Brothers CDBG application.

Ben Block explained that Block Brothers has been in business for 11 years and has been steadily expanding, and is seeking this grant to purchase new equipment to enable the business to meet demand, hire more employees, and continue to expand. To this point, the business has been entirely self-funded, but this gap financing is necessary to fund the expansion and meet demand and manage the shift from being a subcontractor to being a manufacturer, and shipping products out of state to Washington, DC, and upstate New York. He explained that the business's mission has always been to invest in both staff and equipment, and that this grant is the next logical step in the business's growth plan.

Schaffler asked how many employees currently work at Block Brothers, and Ben Block said that there are 19 full-time equivalent employees, and 20 altogether.

Schaffler asked what types of jobs they are looking to add, and Ben Block explained that he is looking to hire all shop jobs, with a mixture of skills and experience required, including some entry-level jobs. Ben Block explained that he is currently working with Educate Maine to establish an apprenticeship program, which will train new and inexperienced hires in a three-year program to give them valuable skills in cabinetry and help strengthen the company's and region's workforce.

Schaffler asked whether Block Brothers intends to stay in Northport for the foreseeable future, and Ben Block responded that his current location includes three acres with plenty of room for further building, and that he intends to stay in Northport for the foreseeable future.

Schaffler asked about the energy efficiency of the existing buildings, and Ben Block responded that all the buildings are heated and cooled with heat pumps, and that he hopes eventually to have the facility have 100% of its electricity be solar generated. He also said that he uses only formaldehyde-free wood, and all of the finishes are VOC-free.

Tucker noted that Block Brothers is funding two thirds of the whole project by way of a bank loan and asked whether the business can handle the extra debt that it will incur to support the expansion, and Ben Block responded that the business is in a very good position financially, and the loan and grant together are necessary for funding both the equipment and the staffing. He said that the company could do one or the other, but not both, without CDBG funding.

Schauffler asked if they have a showroom, and Ben Block responded that they do not. They do have a website, and a lot of their business comes from word-of-mouth and referrals.

Schauffler asked about the company's long-term growth plans. Ben Block responded that, since the company's beginning in a small space in Searsport, they have had consistent incremental growth, and this grant application is the next step in a process that has been ongoing since the company's founding.

Pinkham Bebb asked where the company's employees live, and Ben Block responded that some live in Northport, Belfast, Palermo, Stockton Springs, and Thomaston. Pinkham Bebb wants to make sure that people who work locally can also live locally and hopes that Block Brothers can keep that in mind.

S. Fein asked whether the new machinery will replace employees, and Ben Block responded that the equipment will help the employees do their work more quickly and efficiently, helping the company meet the increased demand. He also said that the focus of the company is always on the hand-made aspects of the products. The goal of the new machinery is to speed up the manufacturing process and allow the company to increase the number of projects that they can complete in a year.

Schauffler asked if the company had staff in-house who were qualified to repair the existing and proposed machinery, and Ben Block said that he has a few employees who are able to service the machinery.

John Worth asked what machines the company plans to buy, and Ben Block explained that he plans to buy a sander, which will also require the installation of three-phase power and a larger dust collector; a 16" joiner; a stationary pocket hole machine; a dovetail machine; and a saw fence.

Patricia Worth asked what the required skill set will be for new employees. Ben Block responded that he will be hiring at a variety of skill levels. She also asked whether the new employees in low-to-medium income positions will be paid a livable wage, and Ben Block responded that he tries to pay his employees a wage sufficient to support a family and live close to work. He wants to ensure that the employees will see room for growth at the company and want to stay for the long term.

Tucker asked for any other questions. Pinkham Bebb asked for a show of hands from those who had come to the hearing to support the application, and all attendees raised their hands (19 people).

Hearing no further questions, Tucker closed the public hearing at 6:38 pm.

Northport Village Corporation: Novotny reported that the Village's annual meeting on Tuesday, August 13, began with a musical tribute to outgoing Overseer Judy Metcalf. Novotny reported that she was elected to a second three-year term as president, Vicki Mathews was reelected to the Board of Overseers, and Elaine Moss and Chris Mix were each elected to the Overseers for the first time.

Novotny asked when the property tax bills would be mailed, and Kossuth reported that the bills were being mailed today, Monday, August 26.

Novotny reported that there had been some acts of political vandalism in the Village, prompting some residents to ask for a return of the police officer next summer.

Novotny reported that Bayside Arts had sponsored several free family movies and concerts over the summer.

Road Commissioner: No report.

Town Administrator:

New Town Office / Community Center update: Kossuth reported that Gartley & Dorsky filed an application for site plan review for the September Planning Board meeting, on September 10.

Kossuth reported that he met with Kristine Wentworth of Oaknut Property Management (1229 Atlantic Highway, former Maine Energy building) to see if the space would be suitable for a temporary Town Office. She is planning to build it out into offices, and it could work for the Town as a temporary site. Kossuth reported that he has not spoken with Brady Brim-DeForest about his property at 845 Atlantic Highway since the spring, so Kossuth will follow up with Brim-DeForest to see if that property is still available, so that the Town could have options.

Kossuth reported that he spoke with Gary Friedmann and Lynn Hemen from Gary Friedmann & Associates (GFA) in Bar Harbor about a capital campaign for the Community Center. Kossuth reported that they are interested in working with the Town on this project. They would start with a 90-day feasibility study, which would cost \$30,000, and then a full campaign to raise approximately \$1.5 million would cost about \$75,000 - \$100,000. The Board discussed the options and decided not to hire for either the feasibility study or full campaign.

Waldo County Hazard Mitigation Plan update: Kossuth reported that Schaffler will be attending the planning meeting on August 28 in his stead, and that the Town is up to date with its homework from the previous meeting. Kossuth presented draft sections of the Hazard Mitigation Plan to the Board for review.

Maine Municipal Association (MMA) Regional Forum for Local Government: Kossuth reported that MMA, in partnership with the Midcoast Council of Governments, is hosting a Regional Forum for Local Government, in partnership with MCOG, inviting local elected officials to meet with state legislative candidates, members of the MMA Legislative Policy Committee, and constituents. The session including Northport's legislators in Searsport on September 12 at 5.30pm. Kossuth reported that he is planning to attend, and that he had personally invited all four legislative candidates. He had only heard from two, and neither could attend. Kossuth reported that the goal of these meetings is to help legislators understand the needs and, perhaps more important, the functions of their local communities.

Maine Infrastructure Adaptation Fund Grant update: Kossuth reported that he has a meeting scheduled with the DOT on September 3 to talk about why two of the Town's grant applications (Bayview Park and Auditorium Park) were not scored.

Tax Abatement and Refund requests: Kossuth presented the Board with personal property tax abatement requests for Mobile Mini, Inc., which had gone out of business and the amounts were uncollectable. The total amount outstanding is \$56.43. The Board reviewed and approved the abatement request.

Kossuth presented the Board with a real property tax refund request from William and Lori Howard (8 Sea Street). They bought 8 Sea Street in 2022, and because of a typo in the mailing address, they claimed not to have received the 30-day lien notice. They have paid the outstanding taxes, interest, and fees in full, and are asking that the Town refund the demand fees for the Town and Village taxes for 2024, a total of \$124.66. The Board reviewed and approved the refund request for \$124.66.

Belfast Ambulance Contract: The contract did not arrive before the meeting. Kossuth will check with Belfast on the status of the contract.

Minutes: Kossuth provided minutes from the meeting of August 12 for the Board to review. The Board approved the minutes with corrections.

Finance Director: Eugley provided the Payroll & Accounts Payable warrants to the Board for review and approval. The Board approved the Payroll & Accounts Payable warrants.

Unfinished Business: None at this time.

New Business: None at this time.

Adjourn: *Pinkham Bebb motioned to adjourn the meeting at 7:50pm, seconded by Tucker. Board voted 3-0, motion passed.*

Respectfully submitted by,

James Kossuth, Town Administrator