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Notes from editor (not for publication):

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Brattleboro will pursue EMS study in 2029, Selectboard
2 says

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 Board adopts recommendations for getting a better
4 understanding and reporting of EMS financial picture, then
5 disbands subcommittee

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

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7 The Selectboard voted unanimously July 7 to adopt a set
8 of recommendations aimed to improve public understanding of
9 the town's ambulance service, capping months of community
10 outreach that grew out of a non-binding resolution passed at
11 Town Meeting.

12 The resolution had called for an independent, third-party
13 consultant to review the town's emergency medical services
14 (EMS) program and raised broader questions about how program
15 finances are reported.

16 Because board members said they were unsure exactly
17 what residents wanted from that resolution, they formed a two-
18 person working group — board Chair Oscar Heller and board
19 member Nell Mayo — to hold public meetings and gather more
20 specific feedback before deciding how to respond.

21 After speaking with many in the community, the two
22 recommended a third-party study be postponed until 2029.

23 A complicated, well-regarded 24 program

25 Brattleboro has been running a municipal EMS
26 department for nearly two years. The then-Selectboard had
27 commissioned a feasibility study by AP Triton before voting to
28 take over the service, formerly provided by Rescue Inc.

29 Fire Chief Jay Symonds has said EMS revenue is
30 projected to be about \$1.3 million by the end of the fiscal year
31 and that demand for services has been increasing 10% to 20%
32 annually.

33 No money for an outside study has been earmarked for a
34 study in the FY27 budget.

35 Presenting the group's findings, Heller told the board two
36 themes emerged consistently from the outreach process.

37 "This is a complicated new program where the numbers
38 are fused with the numbers for the fire department services," he
39 said, adding the overriding intent "was not to revisit old decisions
40 or anything like that, but just to gain a better understanding of
41 this program."

42 He said public opinion of the service itself was uniformly
43 high.

44 “We didn’t hear a single complaint from a member of the
45 public that Brattleboro EMS does a bad job or anything like that,”
46 Heller said.

47 Regarding whether to commission an outside study right
48 away, Heller said most residents who weighed in preferred to
49 wait, for two reasons.

50 “Doing a study in a future year allows for more data to
51 be collected because the program will have existed for longer
52 and, also, if we do a study in a future year, we can budget for it
53 appropriately instead of spending unbudgeted funds,” he said.

54 The memo’s central recommendation is to plan for a
55 third-party study in fiscal year 2029, along with a set of smaller,
56 near-term steps.

57 Heller said the board wants to “hear specific questions
58 from the public, and make sure we get those specific questions
59 answered” and to build out the EMS data page on the town
60 website, “so when somebody asks a question and we get a
61 definitive answer, we can put it up there for posterity for people
62 to refer to.”

63 Mayo thanked everyone who “took the time to speak to
64 us and took the time to come to our meetings.”

65 She said the informal, in-person format of the first public
66 meeting stood out to her.

67 “It was just the level of conversation that could be held
68 in a more informal setting, such that people could directly talk to
69 each other. And it was a bit easier to hear a question and then get
70 an answer in a more immediate sense,” she said, contrasting that
71 format with a formal public forum such as a Selectboard meeting,
72 “where the thread is lost and the question and answer doesn’t get
73 to the person asking it.”

74 Mayo she has compiled “a consolidated list of questions
75 and key points and concerns that I can take to staff” as a starting
76 point for the new web page.

77 Board member Peter Case moved to adopt the
78 recommendations, and board member Amanda Ellis-Thurber

79 thanked the working group and residents who took part, calling
80 the outcome “really tangible and doable.”

81 Heller also noted that Symonds and Assistant Chief
82 Charles Keir III attended the group’s first public meeting.

83 “I felt like everyone left that meeting feeling better about
84 things,” Heller said.

85 **Public questions reporting of** 86 **costs**

87 Several residents spoke during the discussion.

88 Heidi Fisher asked why the board settled on fiscal year
89 2029 for a future study rather than fiscal year 2028, which had
90 been discussed earlier.

91 Heller said there was no “precise calculation” behind the
92 choice but that it was meant to give more breathing room “than
93 just restarting this conversation in three months.”

94 Mayo added that spacing it out also allows the town “to
95 break out the cost and the planning across two budget years.”

96 Resident Kate O’Connor pressed the board on how it
97 plans to get reliable, timely data on EMS revenue and expenses
98 going forward, noting that the town had to file with the Green
99 Mountain Care Board for a certificate of need to start the program
100 “and in that filing is what they said the expenses were going to
101 be.”

102 She warned the board not to be complacent about costs.

103 “We have a great case study that we’re going to be
104 talking about tonight of an institution in our town that things got
105 out of control. And now we’re facing — we’re gonna have to cut
106 something,” said O’Connor, referencing the fiscal shakeup at
107 Brattleboro Memorial Hospital and its board’s recent decision to
108 close its birthing center.

109 She also praised the fire department for sharing annual
110 call-volume data at a previous meeting, noting the actual number
111 of trips “is actually lower than last year’s,” which mattered

112 because the fiscal year 2027 budget had assumed roughly 400
113 more trips than the department ended up making.

114 "There is information that is not just helpful because I am
115 nosy and want to know it," she said. "It's helpful because it helps
116 you folks budget appropriately."

117 Heller said revenue reporting "has improved a lot [...] in
118 the last year" and that the board welcomes help identifying
119 further improvements.

120 He acknowledged expense reporting is harder because it
121 involves "multi-use personnel," adding that "people may not
122 agree on what the assumptions are for how an individual full-
123 time equivalent's time is split between the two disciplines."

124 Once the town hires a permanent finance director, the
125 board can seek "guidance from town staff as to what the split in
126 responsibility would be" between the finance office and the fire
127 department for producing regular reports, Mayo added.

128 Town Manager John Potter pushed back on the
129 suggestion that cost data isn't available.

130 "The information on the cost is all available on the town
131 website under the EMS data. The revenues and the expenses are
132 reported out monthly," he said, adding later in the conversation,
133 "it's very easy to overcomplicate this stuff."

134 "It's not really that hard," Potter said, crediting Symonds
135 with clearly explaining the numbers.

136 Resident Bob Oeser, who said he had met privately with
137 a working-group member and later submitted additional
138 information by email, asked about the process for answering
139 follow-up questions once the subcommittee no longer exists.

140 Residents with detailed or complicated questions may
141 have better luck meeting one-on-one with a board member, said
142 Heller.

143 "I am sure any of us would be willing to get together
144 one-on-one and really explain it [...] and we can work it out and
145 reach a full understanding," he said.

146 Mayo agreed, adding she would be happy to make
147 herself available to do so but that “the answer will ultimately
148 come from town staff” and that it’s appropriate to keep Potter, the
149 board’s EMS point person, looped in.

150 Subcommittee dissolved

151 After the board voted 5–0 to adopt the
152 recommendations, Case moved to formally dissolve the EMS
153 subcommittee.

154 Heller explained that the board “didn’t know when we
155 formed the subcommittee that we would be subject to open
156 meeting law and all that stuff.”

157 “We thought it would make things easier, and it probably
158 made things more complicated,” he said. “Still, I think we did
159 what we set out to do.”

160 Mayo added that dissolving the subcommittee doesn’t
161 end the underlying work.

162 “It doesn’t mean that there cannot be further work done
163 on the issue of public relations and conversations between staff,
164 Selectboard members, and the public about EMS,” she said.
165 “What it does mean is that Oscar and I can talk privately about
166 EMS if we want without worrying about what is substantive work
167 in open meeting law.”

168 The board also voted unanimously to dissolve the
169 subcommittee, closing out the process while leaving the door
170 open for continued informal collaboration among board and staff
171 members and residents about EMS transparency.

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

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174

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VIDEO:

175

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####END VIDEO####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

176

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