

SPECIAL TOWN MEETING

Town of Bethany

January 29, 2025, at 7:00 P.M.

The meeting was called to order at 7:08 p.m. by First Selectwoman Paula Cofrancesco. There were approximately 240 people in attendance. Everyone stood for the Pledge of Allegiance.

Paula Cofrancesco called for nominations from the floor for a moderator. Elizabeth Thornquist made a motion, seconded by Richard Huxley, to nominate Carol Goldberg. There were no further nominations. Carol Goldberg was elected moderator by a unanimous voice vote.

The moderator explained the procedures for speaking and voting at the meeting.

Elizabeth Thornquist – Can we reverse the order of the questions?

Carol Goldberg – Yes, if a motion and second are made.

Steven Thornquist made a motion, seconded by Robert Watson, to dispense reading of the call. There was no discussion. Unanimous approval by voice vote. **Passed.**

The moderator introduced the first item on the printed agenda.

Item (1) To discuss and act on the following question: Shall the Town of Bethany postpone the hiring of a Park and Recreation Director until the independent investigation from the law firm Pullman and Comley has been completed, the Office of Child Advocate's investigation results have been reported and made public, and Parks and Recreation policies, procedures, protocols, and job descriptions have been completed and made available to the public?

Constance Royster made a motion, seconded by Kristine Sullivan, to consider the resolution.

Raymond Veronneau – Is there a time frame where we can anticipate these investigations?

Town Attorney Vincent Marino – Pullman & Comley should be March or April. We have no control over the OCA (Office of the Child Advocate) timeframe.

Kristie Stutsky – Pullman and Comley said yesterday that the OCA abandoned the investigation.

Vincent Marino – I have no information on that.

James Stirling – I signed the petition to bring this question to the voters. The intent was to wait to reduce the town's liability in case of a lawsuit. Our insurance and attorney fees will impact taxes. A new director will be supervised by the first selectman, so we need to know what went wrong. The department should be for all ages. The first question is too broad and will vote no, but will vote yes on second question.

David Pecoraro – Member of the bipartisan Park & Rec Commission. Pullman is not creating policies; it's not in their scope of work. An experienced director will generate policies to be reviewed by the commission and town attorney. Many families are struggling and need these programs.

Joan Black – The Park & Rec Commission has been wonderful reaching out to have a dialogue. The report will outline flaws in the town's response. Problems have been in existence for a long time. We need to understand what went wrong.

Marsha Sawdon – Have a question about the OCA – were you told in an official capacity?

Kristie Stutsky – Pullman & Comley told us the OCA was no longer pursuing the investigation.

Rose Monaco – We don't know exactly what took place and who is responsible. We can't ignore what happened. We need answers.

Jean-Pierre Fletcher – Have a few questions for Paula. Were there policies in place before this happened? How many households use the program? We pay \$30,000 per child and additional funding for Park & Rec after school and summer programs. Why do taxpayers have to pay?

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Paula Cofrancesco – Yes some were in place. We have 2100 households in town. I don't know how many children live in each household.

Judith Smith – Concerned about hiring someone permanently without all the facts. Can we hire an experienced interim director for the short term?

Carol Goldberg – It's a special town meeting so we can't amend the question.

Kathryn Sylvester – People tried to report problems before but were ignored. Only 40% of the households in town have children under the age of 18. Personal information was put online by Park and Rec members. Pullman and Comley said we would have the report by March.

Heather Brinton – We did not use Park and Rec under previous administration because it was not well run. It was a long-term ongoing problem. I want to move the question.

Heather Brinton made a motion, seconded by Robert Brinton, to close debate and vote on Item 1.

The moderator called for a vote on the motion to end debate and proceed to a vote on the main question. Majority approval by show of hands. **Passed.**

The moderator called for a vote on Item 1. Majority rejected question by a show of hands. **Failed.**

Item (2) To discuss and act on the following question: Shall the Town of Bethany postpone the hiring of a Park and Recreation Director until the independent investigation from the law firm Pullman and Comley has been completed?

Kristine Sullivan made a motion, seconded by Sheila Wade, to consider the resolution.

Robert Valenti – Question for Board of Selectmen. Why was it ok to add a second question to the petition signed by 60 people?

Robert Brinton – Member of the Board of Selectmen and felt the law required us to have a town meeting, but worried about the Office of the Child Advocate part. Concerned that if question one passed, there would be no Park and Rec Department. Also believed we shouldn't wait for policies and procedures as a professional would be helpful to establish them.

Robert Valenti – Seems like no one knows what's going on.

Christopher Pittenger – The report should be submitted and released. If we vote for this, does this ensure that report is promptly released?

Robert Brinton – We just took the exact language from the petition.

Carol Goldberg – The selectmen stated report would be released, but it is not in this question.

Nancy Held-Sheehe – Why would the risk begin when we hire a director? We have Park & Rec programs occurring right now operated by the bipartisan commission. The statement of work mentions recommendations or best practices if things were done incorrectly. If nothing is found wrong, there may be no policy suggestions. I think it should move forward.

Sheila Wade – The Park & Rec scandal is not confined to this community, so the applicant pool may be limited. It's too early to have a permanent director. We should investigate other opportunities.

Elizabeth Thornquist – Not aware we are running any programs now. How long will it take to implement the changes? Need to make sure the children are safe. We need to wait for the investigation to be completed.

James Stirling – Plan to vote yes on this question. Spoke to many residents recently and most want both an affordable summer camp and to wait for the report, but were split as to the level of town subsidy. When I asked if Bethany public school could run a summer program, the superintendent said they were not set up or funded for it, but the full board needs to consider it. We should investigate camp Argo in Milford or Bethany public schools.

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Joan Black – Running a day program is very different than running before and after school as well as summer camp. We are lucky nothing ever happened at Vets Park with the lake. We need a robust vibrant program taking the time to do it right. We need to find a reputable group that can come in and use our facilities.

Heather Brinton – Not sure how the school would do both camp and summer school at the same time. Will vote no on this question. We need a Park & Rec program that isn't focused on childcare that provides other opportunities for kids. The volunteer commission knows we need to change the program and follow all the rules that were ignored in the past. We should set up a complaint system to identify problems.

Russell Stutsky – The scope for Pullman & Comley is mostly looking backwards. There is no guarantee this report will issue recommendations. Hiring an experienced Park and Rec director will move the program forward. We could increase fees or apply for grants to reduce taxpayer impact. Not all fees were collected in the past. Please vote no to this question.

David Pecoraro – If we don't hire a director, we won't have a program available. Lack of Park & Rec is a burden on families in town. There will be all new staff; the old ones have been removed.

Carolyn Martin – We don't need the recommendations to fix this. We know there were flaws. Maybe an impartial committee should handle hiring?

Thomas Green – It seems shortsighted for town officials not to have estimated time frames for the investigations at this meeting. What is the estimated time frame for hiring the director?

Paula Cofrancesco – It was advertised, the commission received applications and has vetted them. The Park & Rec chair will follow up on this since I have recused myself from the review.

Jennifer Galik – The commission put together a job description and it was posted in December. We received 49 applications, reviewed resumes, and decided on a pool of seven people for interviews. For the first round of interviews, three commission members, a Republican, an Independent and a Democrat will participate in the process. Also invited the Finance Director, HR Administrator and two Park and Rec directors from other local communities to attend. The plan is to narrow the pool down for a second round of interviews with a performance task. Recommendations will go to the Board of Selectmen to make the hiring decision.

Thomas Green – When would this person be hired? How will report influence decision making?

Jennifer Galik – The first & second round interviews will be in February so probably would start by mid-March. I don't think we need this report before hiring. We know what was broken with Park & Rec and how to fix it, but we are just volunteers. We need a paid director at this point.

Gina Teixeira – Member of the Board of Selectmen. A robust Park and Rec department is good for the town. The town should adhere to all requirements for childcare programs in Connecticut. Paula submitted testimony to the legislature just a few months after a town employee was told he couldn't be around children, advocating for fewer protections for children in towns like Bethany. Rules, regulations, licensing and mandated reporting should be required.

Constance Royster – We need to have the policies and procedures in place that were mentioned in question one. We may not like the report that we receive and reject it. Hired director will have to start from scratch. Putting together a summer program in a few months is asking a lot of a new individual. We should find alternatives for a summer program in Bethany.

Gary MacNamara – The town is in a rebuild. We're running a hoops program now. Other towns have great park and rec departments. The director should develop the policies. The report will tell us there was a lack of leadership, lack of reporting structure, and lack of policies. The report will likely recommend we hire a quality park and rec director.

Naomi Rosenstein – Our first selectman should have zero involvement with the Park and Rec department, but she has been present at almost every meeting. She hand-picked members and posted the director job description without Board of Selectmen input. Bethany Hoops started before policies and procedures were in place. How can we trust the commission to pick a director?

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Paula Cofrancesco – I brought a recommended job description to the commission, and they could have voted it down. I recused myself from Pullman and Comley as well as vetting candidates. Once the commission has a recommendation, it will go to the entire Board of Selectmen for approval. This town needs a director so we can move forward.

Melissa Zaldo – Why can't this be done simultaneously? Hire a director as well as wait for the report and incorporate any suggestions?

Nicholas Bottone – We all care about these kids protection and safety. The only way we can create an enriching program is to get to work now. We need a director in place and working with the commission. We need to move forward and work together.

Glenn Couture made a motion, seconded by John Corbo, to call the question and vote on Item 2.

The moderator called for a vote on the motion to end debate and proceed to a vote on the main question. Majority approval by voice vote. **Passed.**

The moderator called for a vote on Item 2 and appointed counters to tally the votes.
Yes: 62. No: 149. **Failed.**

Elizabeth Thornquist made a motion, seconded by Steven Thornquist, to adjourn the meeting. The motion was passed unanimously by voice vote, and the meeting adjourned at 8:48 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



William L. Brinton,
Bethany Town Clerk