

DT: 12 December 2011
TO: Nelson Select Board
FR: Undersigned Members of Nelson Municipal Records Board (MRB) and Nelson Town Archivist
RE: Comments on Our 6 December Meeting With You

After the meeting on 6 December, we members of the Municipal Records Board and the Town Archivist regret to say that we found the selectmen both uninformed and misinformed about our activities on behalf of the Town.

For example, a comment was made to the effect that "You mean you haven't shredded anything? I thought you had a big truck come up here." In other words, the Select Board was apparently unaware that in fact no documents have been shredded, nor that we do not plan to have any shredded until our assessment process has been completed and we are in agreement that all important documents, both those we are legally required to keep and those that we judge to be of particular interest to the Town, are being retained. As we told you, only inconsequential items have been disposed of. These included old catalogs, pads of forms dating back to pre-computer days, notifications of meetings and conferences as well as conference handouts that were in some cases close to forty years old, and the like.

You also seemed surprised when we described the consultative process we are using to make sure both that we are in compliance with all RSA guidelines and that we are retaining all Nelson memorabilia. This has been a careful and painstaking process and we are proud of the work we have done so far, up to and including cleaning a filthy, rodent-infested storage space, disposing of years of trash, and giving various Nelson organizations, particularly our Library and the Town Archives, the opportunity to review and assess long-forgotten materials.

While we realize that we live in litigious times and are sympathetic to your concern about potential lawsuits, we remain puzzled by your statements at the meeting that "we have to come up with a policy that will preclude what has happened" and "this cannot happen again." We can assure you that what has "happened" as far as we are concerned has been that a group of concerned Nelson residents has spent Tuesday afternoons for the last several months cleaning a storage area and sifting through an enormous jumble of papers, meticulously following RSA directives to determine what should be kept and what can be discarded, as well as beginning the tedious process of organizing Town records. We can only wonder if someone saw us disposing of trash - all those cartons stored "just in case" over the years, as well as broken and outdated office equipment, the old catalogs and similar materials as described above - and jumped to the conclusion that we were discarding items of value instead of fire hazards and havens for rodents.

If this was the case, we regret that the person or persons did not simply come and talk to us, and that the Select Board took immediate steps to penalize us. Unfortunately, although the former Select Board Chair had agreed to be a member of the MRB, he did not attend any of our meetings or work sessions, and his place on the Board has now remained vacant for some time. He was given copies of the minutes of our July, August and September meetings. (Our October and November meetings were site visits, to the Sullivan and Historic Harrisville archives. They will be available after they are approved at our next meeting.) We would have valued the Select Board's input and counsel, and we believe you would have found our careful stewardship more than satisfactory. It is in large part the result of the absence of a Select Board member at MRB meetings and work sessions, as well as his failure to appoint a substitute, we think, that has led to your lack of awareness of the work we have been doing and to the ill-considered humiliation of a respected elected official of the Town and, though to a far lesser extent, the humiliation both of the members of the MRB and the Town Archivist.

Your action was taken without warning, without notification, and without asking any of us a single question about our work. In addition to suffering what we believe to be entirely unsubstantiated implied accusations draped in a protective veil of legalese - accusations which might well have been laid to rest immediately if you had questioned us, or joined us for even a single work session - our task has been impeded and our pleasure in doing something worthwhile for the Town has been tainted.

We may of course be wrong in our judgment. The threat to the Town may have been so serious that there was no alternative to immediately padlocking the second floor of the Town offices without so much as a single phone call of notification that this was to be done. The work of the MRB and Town Archivist may have been merely collateral damage of a potentially catastrophic situation. Nonetheless, based on what we know about the work we have been doing, we can see no reason whatsoever for what looks to us like nothing more than an arbitrary, hasty and heavy-handed action on the part of the Select Board.

How could this have been avoided? An explanatory phone call to the Town Clerk. A statement that an emergency had occurred, that on the advice of counsel the archives and records would be locked until a resolution was devised. Another statement that you had been instructed by the Town's attorney not to discuss the matter further for the time being.

Instead, in addition to impeding the work of the MRB and the Town Archivist (as well as the two residents who have devoted uncounted hours to mapping the old Town roads) your actions have seriously damaged the formerly cordial professional relationship between these groups and the Select Board. Your "solution" in the face of our protests - that a member of the Select Board remove the padlock and remain to supervise us while we work - is insulting and unsatisfactory.

We trust that our explanation of the process we have put in place and our obvious concern for the history and records of the Town, which we think easily matches yours, have eliminated your misapprehensions. Therefore, we urge you in the strongest terms to remove the padlock from the door to the second floor of the Town offices. It is an embarrassing reminder that we, a group of residents who

have both the professional qualifications and the willingness to do this work, have been stigmatized by a Board of Selectmen none of whose members has yet to join us even as an observer, much less as a fellow concerned Nelson resident dedicated to completing this important task.

We are hereby formally requesting that this letter and our version of the minutes of the 6 December meeting be permanently included with the minutes of this meeting.

Signed, in alphabetical order,

David Birchenough for the MRB

Susan Hansel, for the MRB and as Assistant Town Archivist

Edith Notman, for the MRB

John Shea, for the MRB

Theresa Upton, for the MRB (Chair)

Roberta Wingerson, Town Archivist