



Ryegate held its 6th Annual Winter Festival at Tickenaked Pond on Feb. 23. Events included horse sleigh rides, snowman construction, sledding, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing; a chili cook-off; hotdogs over an open fire; 2 mores; ice fishing; ice skating; and other activities.

JO PHOTO BY RICHARD SWENSON

Lawyer: no easement on Powderhouse Hill

by Alex Nuti-de Biasi
NORTH HAVERHILL—There could be an end in sight to the long-simmering dispute over the Powderhouse Hill property in Haverhill Corner.

At the Haverhill Selectboard meeting on Feb. 19, town attorney Walter Mitchell of Laconia said it was his opinion that a 19th-century right of way across private property to a historic parcel along Route 10 no longer applies. Mitchell said the easement ceased to exist when the state of New Hampshire relinquished ownership of the parcel in the middle of the 19th century.

The right of way and potential access to the property have been at the heart of a dispute between Haverhill town officials and property owners Mike and Dawn Lavoie of Haverhill Corner. The Lavoies own several properties adjacent to the 5-acre Powderhouse Hill parcel.

Mitchell said he thought the Lavoies should consult their own attorney to confirm his assessment. There was little other discussion of the finding. The selectmen met with Mitchell prior to the start of the selectboard meeting.

Voters at town meeting have twice voted not to sell the historic parcel, the site of a War of 1812-era munitions storage and a former burial ground, after the Lavoies petitioned the town seeking the sale of what was once believed to be town-owned property.

Although next to Route 10 on the west side of the state highway, access to property is challenging. Speakers, including Haverhill Selectboard Chair Wayne Fortier and Haverhill Heritage Commission members, opposed to selling the property had said during town meetings that there may be a public right of way across an abutting parcel owned by the Lavoies.

The Lavoies have criticized the assertions that there is a right of way and said that interfered with their ability to market and sell the adjacent property. As recently as the selectboard meeting on Feb. 4, the Lavoies and their surveyor, LeAnn Roberge, pressed the selectboard to give up its pursuit of a right of way.

In 2018, voters at town meeting directed the selectmen to commission a survey of the property in an effort to resolve the questions. The results of that survey were presented in December, but selectmen wanted the town attorney to review the findings before moving forward.

"We defer to the town attorney," said selectboard member Fred Garafalo on Feb. 4.

Mitchell's recommendation comes a little over two months after selectmen were told the town does not even own the property. That finding came from Roy Sabourin, the surveyor the town hired after town meeting last March.

Sabourin said the title holder of the historic parcel is an entity called the Haverhill Cemetery Corporation, which likely no longer exists. The private corporation is distinct from the municipal cemetery commission which is a public body and appointed by the selectboard.

Sabourin said it was likely that the parcel's title would eventually flow to the town even if the property was found to be owned by a defunct entity. Interim Town Manager Glenn English noted that over the years the town has taken possession of dozens of properties after their owners went bankrupt or ceased to exist.

Sabourin also found a right of way given in an 1817 deed from Moody Bedell to the state for access to a tiny one-eighth of an acre plot of land within the interior of the larger 5-acre parcel.

Mitchell said that right of way vanished when the state gave up its interest in the property around 1848 to the cemetery corporation.

Editor: ajonesw.com.

Voters delay school merger

by Alex Nuti-de Biasi

BRADFORD—Newbury residents want to wait and see whether the state's judicial branch will halt a forced school district merger.

On Feb. 25, over 60 people gathered in the Oxbow High School Auditorium to hold the inaugural meeting of the tentatively named Oxbow Unified School District.

The new single district, under an Act 46 mandate from the Vermont Secretary of Education, would encompass Bradford and most of Newbury, excluding Wells River, and would oversee Bradford Elementary School, Newbury Elementary School, Oxbow High School, and River Bend Career and Technical Center.

But approximately 15 minutes after the meeting was slated to order, it was adjourned and ordered to reconvene on March 25, also a Monday night.

The delay comes as voters in districts around the state have taken

similar action. Organizational meetings in Franklin County and Washington County were also delayed in the last week as some school districts—plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the state—want to wait until a Vermont Superior Court judge makes a ruling in the civil action.

The plaintiffs want to bar the Vermont Agency of Education from enforcing its Act 46 order issued in November.

Under that order, the three existing school districts overseeing Bradford Elementary School, Newbury Elementary School, and Oxbow High School would be dissolved. A new single district overseeing the three campuses would be formed and take effect on July 1, 2019. The merger would not affect school operations or prompt school closures.

But Newbury has joined dozens of towns around the state seeking to thwart Act 46's mandate in a

lawsuit. And on Monday night, many Bradford and Newbury residents voted to delay the action until the judge makes a ruling.

"It just seemed like a moot point," said Paul Sachs of Newbury. "Before the judge has made a decision."

Sachs, who made the motion to adjourn the meeting, said his understanding is that the judge will make a decision before March 25. Caledonia-Orange state Sen. Joe Benning opened the meeting at the request of Vermont Secretary of State Dan French. Benning read the warning before asking for nominations for a temporary moderator to run the meeting.

Scott Labun of Newbury was nominated and elected to the post in a unanimous vote. After his election, the motion was made to

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Vote disappoints Orford chief

by Cicely Richardson

ORFORD—Before giving his monthly report on Feb. 13, Orford Police Chief Jason Bachus read a statement into the record. He said he was "disheartened and disappointed" by selectboard's decision three weeks earlier to remove two articles from the town meeting warrant.

Bachus was not at the Jan. 23 meeting when selectboard member Jim McGoff, joined by Dave Smith, chose to reconsider, then voted to remove an electronic ticketing package and a Taser weapon system from town meeting consideration.

Board chair John Adams favored leaving these on the warrant, so the town meeting could discuss and decide whether to purchase them. But the other two board members followed the advice of budget advisory committee member Tom Thomson who pointed out that that committee had opposed these two articles.

Bachus said he had been hired last summer to rebuild the police department that had been shut down for more than a year, and that he believes these are essential tools for the efficient, effective and safe

operations of the department.

Describing the Taser as one of several "less than lethal tools" that can be used to deescalate a dangerous situation and get compliance, Bachus invited community members who have questions to speak with him or neighboring communities which have Tasers.

The police chief had agreed to move these requests from his operating budget into separate articles in order "to elicit participation and inclusiveness of residents and to show transparency," he said, adding, "This opportunity was eliminated when the selectboard voted to not even present them to the taxpayers."

At a sparsely attended public hearing on Jan. 15, Bachus said there was "an excellent discussion" but "no direct objection" to having the warrant articles presented to the taxpayers. However, the selectboard decided a week later, "with no input from me," to remove them from the warrant, he noted.

Bachus followed with his monthly report and told the board that Tasco Security would be installing new cameras at the town offices, at no cost to the town. Tim Surprenant of Tasco offered the new system free of charge because, he said, police departments are required to have security cameras.

The new system will replace old cameras which failed last summer with eight new video cameras inside

and outside the town offices, with the video to be fed into the Orford Police Department and Hanover Dispatch. Because these video feeds are specifically "for crime prevention and public safety," Bachus said, they are exempt from public disclosure.

Bachus gave the selectboard a draft security camera policy for their review and adoption, preferably at its next meeting. Among other provisions, the policy would state that only the police would be allowed to make copies, although the selectboard can view the video, which will be deleted after 30 days.

The selectboard voted to accept the gift from Tasco Security, which began installing the system the following week.

Further discussion of pros and cons of the Taser followed, but Adams shut it down, saying this was not on the table. "If people want to bring it up at town meeting, they can," he said.

Fire chief Terry Straight and road agent Kevin Sawyer were on the agenda but were unable to attend the meeting. Straight was tied up at work, and the latest storm was occupying Sawyer.

McGoff objected to the posting of a complaint on the Orford listserve, in which resident Faith Knapp stated, "traveling down

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PVS budget shows increase

by Helga Mueller

PIERMONT—At the Feb. 19 Piermont Village School District Budget Hearing, the school board presented the proposed 2020 school budget in the amount of \$2,303,384, an increase of \$157,101 over the 2019 budget of \$2,146,283 to the seven residents attending the meeting.

Board chair Vernon Jones went over some of the changes in revenues and expenditures in the proposed budget. There are changes in revenues and expenditures, a decrease in the state adequacy grant, a decrease in kindergarten aid, an increase in the state adequacy tax, increases in Special Education and vocational out-of-state tuition. Overall, the budget shows an increase of 7.42 percent over the 2019 budget.

Tax projections for 2020 show an estimated school tax rate of \$18.15 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation compared to \$14.84 in 2019. The local education tax is \$15.91 and the state education tax is \$2.24.

The tax rate impact on a \$150,000 home would be \$2,722.70, an increase of \$496.70 over 2019.

On a \$250,000 home the impact would be \$4,537.84, in increase of \$827.84 over 2019.

The annual school district meeting will take place on March 19, at 7 p.m. at the Village School.



JUST PARK IT IN THE SNOWBANK—As winter marches on, the snowbanks have become walls and finding parking space is difficult. This bicyclist picked a safe, out of reach spot to park at the Four Corners Store in Piermont last week.

JO PHOTO BY MICHELLE SHERBURNE

Internet tops committee hearing

by Rebecca Mallory

BRADFORD—A panel of Vermont policymakers overseeing economic development were in Bradford last week and they heard a lot about internet access in rural communities.

The Vermont Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs held a hearing on rural economic development and innovation at the Space on Main on Feb. 19.

The hearing came after Senate President Tim Ashe, D/P-Burlington, asked each senate committee to hold a hearing outside of Montpelier with the aim of making the legislative process more accessible to people and gathering individuals to testify on ideas for expansion of coworking spaces and makerspaces, downtown development, internet access in small rural towns, etc.

"I reached out to just over 30

coworking spaces, makerspaces, and innovators that host their programming at these facilities," Priestley said in an interview. "In addition, I reached out to countless individuals from the housing industry, regional economic development corporations, and broadband efforts."

The hearing, headed up by committee chair Senator Michael Sirokin, featured testimony from several dozen witnesses including former Vermont gubernatorial candidate Matt Dunne, Priestley, and Edward Childs, a board member of the Newbury Telecommunications Rural Development Infrastructure District and a member of the newly formed Corinth Broadband Group.

Sirokin, a South Burlington Democrat, was joined by fellow committee members Alison Clarkson, Becca Balint, Randy Brock, and Cheryl Hooker.

During her testimony, Priestley highlighted four topics relating to

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•Vote disappoints

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Archertown Road has become more and more of a hazard every day." She cited potholes and ice flows and asked why there are no signs to warn drivers of the hazards.

Attending the meeting, Knapp stood by her statements, saying "there is nothing in there that isn't factual."

"The road has been neglected," she said, adding, "why aren't there signs?"

"The problem with that road is the season we've got," replied McGoff. "Potholes are caused by

the weather." "We've had a bad break on potholes," Adams concurred, adding that some of the problem was because "we were behind in the fall" when the road crew was short-handed. They both said that warmer weather is needed to adequately patch potholes, but Adams said they should take Knapp's advice about signs.

The worst areas on and at the foot of the Archertown Road hill have apparently been problems for decades. McGoff said that Jim Field, who was road agent during the mid-1990s, said there had been talk of blasting the ledge at that time, but the selectboard had vetoed that.

Looking ahead, Adams said they have been working with engineers to develop long term plans to fix the hill and replace the bridge over Jacobs Brook.

"Kevin is aware of the problems

and is waiting for a break in the weather," said Adams, adding that the road crew is down one person again, due to an injury.

To report hazardous situations and road problems, people were told to call dispatch at (603) 643-2222 or the selectboard office at (603) 353-4889.

Email: crichardson@jones.com.

EMBROIDERERS GUILD
SOUTH BURLINGTON—The Green Mountain Chapter of the Embroiders' Guild of America will meet on March 13 at 9:30 a.m. at the Ascension Lutheran Church, 95 Allen Road, South Burlington. All abilities welcome. First meeting is complimentary. Bring a project to work on and a bag lunch. Carpooling is available from many areas. Contact number 922-9336 or e-mail at: gmc.vt.egag@gmail.com

SCOTTISH DANCING

FAIRLEE—There will be Scottish Country Dancing on March 6, 13, 20, and 27 from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Fairlee Town Hall, 75 Town Common Road, Fairlee. Cost is \$3 (first time is free). All dances are taught, no partner is necessary, beginners are welcome. For more information, call (802) 439-3459 or e-mail fairlee@scwdboston.org.

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•Hearing

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economic growth that would dominate the day: the need for a more expansive broadband network, a remote worker program that not only encourages remote workers to relocate to Vermont but matches them to available workplaces and engages them in local communities, means to support and incentivize business and entrepreneurial programming, and the economic importance of thriving downtowns.

On the subject of broadband, Priestley shared that when pricing out fiber for the Space on Main a year ago, "it was going to be \$2,200 per month, then \$1,100 per month, and is currently \$375 per month for 50-50 [speed] (half of what it should be)." Despite the drop in price, internet remains the Space's greatest monthly expense outside of its lease.

Childs, an engineer who works remotely, is unable to work from his home in Corinth due to available internet speed. He is now a member of the Space on Main.

He spoke on behalf of Newbury REDI District and the Corinth Broadband Group. Both groups are dedicated to pursuing economic development through the introduction of a fiber optic broadband network that would bring affordable, high-speed internet access to every home and business in their respective towns.

Newbury REDI District is a municipal entity operating within Newbury. The district is a legal entity established during the 2017 legislative session and signed into law by Gov. Phil Scott in June of that year, and the first such district in Vermont.

When it comes to access to high-speed internet, rural communities are at a disadvantage in large part thanks to federal law; the FCC does not deem internet access an essential service. Newbury REDI Board Chair Claire Phipps explained that the problems faced by towns like Newbury begin on a national level as there are no incentives for corporations to provide fiber internet if they hold a monopoly in a particular area.

A REDI District seeks to create a cooperative relationship with these existing providers. In Newbury's case, the REDI District hopes to install fiber, owned by the District, on top of the existing copper phone and DSL lines owned by Consolidated Communications.

To help with these goals, Childs believes local groups need someone at the state level with the expertise to help them navigate legal, regulatory, financial, and technical challenges and complexities that come with providing fiber.

He also suggested a revolving loan fund to help fiber groups throughout the state cover start-up costs. Newbury REDI has been, thus far unsuccessfully, trying to raise \$25,000 for the last year. Lastly, Childs asked the committee to consider loan guarantees at 85 or 90 percent interest rates that would allow start-up broadband borrowers high risk for banks and other funding options, to obtain loans at interest rates below market.

While much of the hearing focused on economic development, the importance of affordable housing was also an integral part of the discussion. Balint, the senate majority leader and a Democrat from Brattleboro, stated that, as a committee, "we absolutely see those two things must interplay in order to have resilient villages, downtowns."

Laura Olson, property manager of Downstreet Housing & Community Development, gave testimony on behalf of the organization. Downstreet helps individuals throughout Central Vermont by providing affordable housing as well as other resources, services, and initiatives.

In Bradford, Downstreet provides mostly subsidized housing to approximately 100 individuals through the Colonial Village Apartments, the Waits River Housing Project, and the Whistlertop Mobile Home Park. Olson emphasized the importance of economically and socially flourishing downtowns, and resources like the Space on Main, to helping their residents thrive.

Throughout the day both the Space and Priestley were highly

Town meeting preview

Grader tops Newbury agenda

by Rebecca Mallory

NEWBURY—The proposed cost of a new grader is a large expenditure up for debate on Newbury's town meeting warning.

Article 8 of the warning requests that voters authorize the purchase of a grader for a price not to exceed \$245,000.

Newbury Selectboard Chair Alma Roystan said in an interview that the grader is a definite priority as the older of the two graders necessary to maintain Newbury's roads has "outlived its life expectancy." The selectboard hopes to replace the 1990 Champion with a

2012 John Deere.

Also of interest is a proposed \$10,000 increase in the fire department's budget for equipment and equipment reserve. According to Roystan, this increase is entirely due to the "phenomenal" costs of equipment (including engines, protective gear, and trucks) and a lack of reserves to cover them.

In 2018, the West Newbury Fire Department's continued need for a new fire truck led the Selectboard to appoint a committee to look into the possibility of combining the West Newbury and Newbury fire departments. However, according to Roystan, the increased equipment spending is unrelated to that possibility. The committee's report is included in the town report and discussion about consolidation may very well take place during town meeting.

Roystan says that overall, there is nothing particularly out-of-the-ordinary about this year's warning though she does note that article

10, other business, may include some debate regarding the State's approach to renewable energy.

"The legislature has been discussing moving to entirely renewable energy by the year 2050," Roystan explained. "I know some folks are interested in putting pressure on legislators to speed that timeline up. That may come up during discussion of other business."

Article 10 allows for open discussion, opinions, and straw polls but not for the allotment of funds or other tangible action.

After many years of service, Brian Emerson will not seek reelection to the selectboard as his increased responsibilities at River Bend Career and Technical Center come with additional demands on his time. Regarding Emerson's retirement, Roystan said, "Brian's focus has always been about what is best for the Town. He has been diligent in that focus and approaching everything with thoughtfulness and his own brand of humor. We'll miss him."

Joe Parsons is running unopposed for selectman for a three-year term. Parsons would join Roystan and current selectman Steve Cole.

"I love it," Roystan says of town meeting. "To me, local Town Meetings like Newbury, are the purest form of Democracy there is. I don't expect the unexpected? Yes, there is always a surprise and often not what you think it might be."

Newbury Town Meeting is on March 5 at 10 a.m. at the Newbury Elementary School.

BMU annual meeting next week

WELLS RIVER—Voters in Groton, Ryegate, and Wells River will go to the polls next week on town meeting day to vote on the school district budget for 2019-2020.

The proposed budget is \$7,700,948, down over \$710,000 from the previous year. Much of that change has to do with the fact that BMU is no longer a standalone supervisory union.

Now officially and permanently a part of Orange East Supervisory Union, the district is receiving its supervisory union services from Bradford. That change is having an impact on BMU's bottom line, according to a letter to the editor submitted by school board members (see p. 6).

Despite the drop in spending, there is also a decrease in revenue which will cause an increase in taxes, according to the letter.

Polls will be open in the two towns and one village from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. on March 5. BMU's deliberative session will be held the prior evening at 6 p.m. in the school library. A public hearing on the budget will also be held at that time.

Town meeting preview

Bradford

BRADFORD—There will be three selectboard seats up for vote at this year's town meeting after one member resigned prior to the completion of her term.

Incumbents Ted Unkles and Carole Taylor will both seek re-election to the board for three-year and two-year terms, respectively. With one year remaining on her term, Lisa Sharp Grady has resigned from the board. Nominations for elected officers in Bradford are made from the floor.

In other business, voters will be asked to adjust the length of term for the elected collector of delinquent taxes. The current holder is Jennifer Rivers, who also serves as town treasurer.

Meanwhile, the proposed budget for 2019 is relatively stable, as town officials say there could be some big ticket items coming up for vote in 2020. For this year, the total town and highway budget is just over \$2.3 million with \$1,968,630 to be raised in taxes.

There is one petitioned article on the warning. Article 13 asks voters to urge the state to stop new fossil fuel infrastructure and to transition to renewable energy in a fair or equitable manner.

Town meeting starts at 9 a.m. on March 5 at the Bradford Academy.

Email: editor@jones.com.

Opioid overdoses continue rise

BURLINGTON—In 2018, 110 Vermonters died from opioid overdoses, up two percent from 2017. But state officials also say the rate of increase in opioid-related deaths has dropped significantly over the past several years.

The rate of accidental opioid-related deaths has gone from a 30 percent increase between 2015 and 2016, to 12 percent from 2016 to 2017, and is now down to two percent, according to the Vermont Department of Health.

The progress is attributed to Vermont's systems of care and community efforts to reach people and get them into treatment. The impact comes from the state's Hub and Spoke treatment system—more than 8,000 Vermonters currently receive medication-assisted treatment in state supported facilities, and 4,000 people received recovery center services in 2018, compared to 2,000 in 2014.

Despite the positive trends, health officials are concerned about the ongoing challenge of fentanyl. Fentanyl, which can be 50 times more powerful than heroin, which was a factor in 75 percent of opioid-related overdoses in 2018, up from 69 percent in 2017. The number of fatalities involving fentanyl has nearly tripled since 2015.

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