

Selectboard 2015 Annual Report

Alex Weinhagen, Chairperson

1/10/2016

First and foremost, many thanks to our Town staff and community volunteers. Our dedicated staff deals with day to day operations in our community, answers questions, and helps implement our Town vision. Numerous volunteers serve on committees, boards, and in appointed and elected positions. Each volunteer brings interest, time, dedication, and expertise. Your service to Westford is vital and it is much appreciated! The Selectboard certainly could not fulfill its role as the Town's legislative body without the contributions and work of Town staff and community volunteers. Notable Selectboard happenings for 2015:

Personnel (managing staff)

Town Treasurer – After a lengthy hiring process, we hired Linda Hardy as our part-time Town Treasurer in June 2015. Linda is a Westford resident, and she brings private sector financial experience to the Treasurer position. In small town government, personality and disposition are extremely important, and with Linda we have someone with skills, the ability to ask questions, and do so with a smile and a positive team attitude. Mary Jane Featherstone (Bookkeeper) and Nanette Rogers (Town Clerk & Town Administrator) deserve credit for working extra hours and covering extra tasks for many months during our Treasurer search.

Delinquent Tax Collector – Early in 2015, we welcomed back Marge McIntosh as our Delinquent Tax Collector. Marge is a Westford resident, and had been our elected Delinquent Tax Collector for many years. When the Town Charter changed this to an appointed position, she applied and was quickly appointed in recognition of her skills, dedication, and excellent service she has given to the community. Many thanks to the search committee that advertised, interviewed, and made recommendations for both the Delinquent Tax Collector and Town Treasurer positions. That committee did the lion's share of the search/work - Kaye Alexander, Barb Peck, Chet Balon, Allison Weinhagen, David Adams.

Recreation Coordinator – In November 2015, we hired Rebecca Gwozdz to replace Town Recreation Coordinator Heather Armata. Heather, your enthusiasm and organizational skills will be sorely missed. Online payments, soon to be online registration, expanded programming, keeping pace with changing recreation needs and changing demographics. You brought positive change to our Town!

Finances (managing tax dollars)

Independent Professional Audit – Our first professional audit in 20+ years was completed in December 2015, after two years of cleaning up the Town's financial records and improving our accounting processes. Fothergill Segale and Valley (Certified Public Accountants based in Montpelier) conducted the audit and delivered its draft report to the Selectboard in December 2015. The audit results are summarized in the Town Report, and the full audit report is available on the Town website. On the numbers side, the audit work established that the Town ended the last two fiscal years (FY14-15 & FY13-14) with a surplus, resulting in a fund balance as of June 30, 2015 of \$168,743. This is a substantially larger fund balance than we previously estimated, which is good news. On the process and financial procedures side, the auditors had primarily positive findings about our accounting practices. There is always room for improvement, and we plan to make additional procedural changes as suggested by the auditors. The Town's cleaned up accounting system and positive financials would not have been possible were it not for a frankly herculean effort by our bookkeeper – Mary Jane Featherstone. Many

thanks to MJ for countless hours untangling the Town's financial records. Our Internal Financial Controls Committee (Allison Weinhagen, Alice Astarita, John Quinn, Dan McLean, Maurice Rathbun, Henry Tarrier) also deserve a big thank you for advertising and helping select our audit firm. Per the recommendation of our Town Treasurer and Bookkeeper, the Selectboard plans to have this firm conduct a professional audit for the next two fiscal years as well (FY15-16 & FY16-17). As noted below, we are also asking voters whether we should transition from elected auditors to having a professional firm audit the Town's finances every year.

The Selectboard is indebted to our entire financial team for the last few years of extra work and attention to the Town's financial records and accounting practices – in addition to those mentioned above: Linda Hardy (Town Treasurer), Ernie Saunders (accounting software consultant), Nanette Rogers (Town Administrator), and our elected Town Auditors (Henry Tarrier, Kristen Elliott, Maurice Rathbun).

Proposed Budget (FY16-17) – The Town budget proposal for next fiscal year is detailed in the tables contained in the Town Report. As it is every year, the budget is a balancing act between necessary community investments, the bottom line of spending, and the resulting implications for taxes. We typically prioritize replacement and repair of existing infrastructure, and this year is no different with proposed spending and borrowing to replace one highway dump truck, one fire department pumper truck, and to do necessary ongoing road maintenance and reconstruction. Thanks in part to the healthy fund balance verified by the audit, the use of equipment reserve funds, and the lack of any big ticket projects, we were able to craft a budget proposal that should result in a slight decrease in your tax bill.

Roads (managing transportation)

Seymour Road Bridge – It took us over 2 years due to delayed FEMA reviews, but in October 2015 the new Seymour Road bridge was completed. In May 2013, Seymour Road washed out at the Beaver Brook crossing during a heavy storm. Rather than replacing undersized culverts (as was done multiple times in the past), we leveraged FEMA funds to install a properly sized bridge – designed to last for 50+ years and withstand large storm events. At over \$600,000, this was the largest infrastructure project the Town has undertaken in a very long time. The arduous task of obtaining promised FEMA reimbursement funds for this completed project is still underway.

Summer Road Reconstruction – After a stormy summer of 2013 and staffing issues in the summer of 2014, the Town Road Crew got back to road reconstruction projects this summer. The road crew rebuilt problematic sections on the southern end of both Old Stage Road and Woods Hollow Road. A section of Allen Irish Road is up next, but may have to wait until the next fiscal year (after July 1, 2016) due to higher than anticipated costs for the Westford-Milton Road paving project.

Westford-Milton Road Repaving – Regular resurfacing was done in the fall of 2015. Our paved Town roads need this every 10 years or so. This time it was done with white line striping adjusted on the sides to encourage drivers to share the road – i.e., more room for bicyclists and pedestrians on the edge of the pavement.

Traffic Enforcement – As of July 1, 2015, we began contracting solely with the Chittenden County Sheriff Department for traffic enforcement, instead of splitting our contracts between the Sheriff and the State Police. This contract is primarily to address speeding. The Town also purchased a speed radar sign to help make drivers more aware of their speed.

Other Projects (managing the rest of the story)

PACE District Established – Approved by Town voters a couple years ago, the Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) program is a way of financing energy efficient home improvements by borrowing money and tying the payments to a property rather than the owner. PACE financing payments can be transferred to a new homeowner at any time, including before the assessment has been paid off. We were finally able to settle on necessary administrative procedures in March 2015. Westford residents now have another lending option for funds to improve home energy efficiency and install renewable energy technologies. For more information, contact Efficiency Vermont - our partner and program administrator.

Town Plan Adopted – In May 2015, the Selectboard adopted a new Town Plan prepared by the Planning Commission and the Planning Coordinator. The Town Plan establishes the community vision for Westford. It outlines our history, describes the present, and makes recommendations for the future on a wide variety of topics – e.g., land use, transportation, natural resources, economic development, etc. It also serves as the basis for our Zoning Regulations and Subdivision Regulations, which have been undergoing a substantial re-write by the Planning Commission.

Trash Collection Changes – State statute (Act 148) mandated statewide recycling and unit-based trash collection. As a result, the Selectboard was required to implement a “pay as you throw” system for our existing town-wide trash collection. This was implemented in the fall of 2015 with a sticker program and direct billing by the trash hauler (currently Gauthier) for trash in excess of the 64-gallon/week allotment. The Town will be negotiating a new trash and recycling contract in 2016.

Elimination of Elected Town Auditors – At Town Meeting, there will be an article to decide whether or not to eliminate the Town Auditor positions in favor of having an annual professional audit. This is timely given the difficulty in finding residents to serve as volunteer Town Auditors, and the Selectboard’s decision to move to an annual professional audit.

Projects that need further attention

Jackson Farm & Forest Project – In 2015, a group of citizens organized to work on conserving the former Bob Jackson property on the west side of Brookside Road (opposite the school). This group has been working with the landowners (David & Lynn Gauthier) and the Vermont Land Trust to structure an outcome that would be beneficial to all parties including the Town. As currently envisioned, the Town could end up owning approximately 133 acres of forest land. Included in this acreage is the northern portion of the existing field, which has suitable soils for substantial wastewater disposal/treatment via a traditional in-ground system. The bulk of the existing fields (42 acres) would also be conserved, and sold to a farmer for continued agricultural use. Excluded from conservation would be an approximately 4-acre lot around the Jackson house site (tentatively to be purchased and renovated by a neighbor) and a new 1-acre building lot for the landowner. This project has many potential benefits to the community (farm conservation, a new Town forest, protection of historic/iconic stone walls, viable location for future community wastewater treatment, etc.), but will also require funding for acquisition. This real estate deal is more complicated than most given the potential to leverage substantial State conservation funding. Negotiations with the landowners are ongoing.

Spiller Property Plan – The Selectboard had decided and has funds set aside for demolition of the Town-owned Spiller house on Common Road. This may still happen in the spring of 2016, but questions remain about the future use of the existing septic system on the property. Future Town use of the

property is still possible, but likely many years down the road. Short term and long term uses for the property remain unclear and need further discussion and decision making.

School Property Disposition –The School Board and Selectboard have agreed to work collaboratively to sort out ownership and use agreements for the Westford School properties ahead of the creation of the Regional Education District (RED) on July 1, 2017. The hard work and real decision making will happen in 2016.

Discharge of Firearms – In July 2015, a resident brought a public safety concern to the Selectboard regarding the discharge of firearms on Town trails. This is clearly an important issue for trail users as well as gun enthusiasts. The Selectboard is still weighing the pros and cons of putting up safety zone type notices versus some sort of firearm discharge ordinance.

Common Area Wastewater System – In the fall of 2015, a consultant delivered to the Planning Commission a conceptual plan with cost estimates for a possible municipal wastewater treatment system on the Jackson Farm & Forest property for the Common area and Brookside Road. Just an interesting planning exercise at this point, but it does provide one way to solve a critical limitation to economic development in/around Westford's town center.

Respectfully submitted,
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Casey Mathieu