

## Dustin Cota Sentenced for Sex Assaults

By Doug McClure

**BARRÉ** — On September 30, Dustin Ray Cota, 21, of Hardwick, was convicted and sentenced on three charges carrying concurrent sentences of three to twenty years.

Cota was charged with sexual assault/threatening or coercing, lewd and lascivious conduct and lewd and lascivious conduct with a child. He pleaded guilty to the charges. Additional charges of sexual assault, sexual assault on a victim less than sixteen years old, and sexual abuse of a vulnerable adult, were dismissed by the state. Pursuant to a plea agreement Cota was also ordered to pay \$441 in fines. The prisoner was remanded into custody at Northeast State Correction in St. Johnsbury.

Allierville state that both crimes took place at Nichols Pond in Hardwick. In a letter to the court, Cota stated that he did not intend to harm anyone. Subsequent to being placed under arrest at his home residence, the affidavit states Cota "began to talk of his biological father and said that he was in jail for physically and sexually assaulting him during his early childhood."

Cota is required to register as a sex offender and undergo a psychological evaluation.

about what happened," but later described the incident. In a later phone call recorded by State Police, Cota stated to a third party that the contact with the minor "did not [happen] intentionally" and "his hand must have slipped."

Cota's adult victim described Cota as "acting drunk" and following them and a second person into the woods prior to the assault. The victim said that Cota used coercion to sexually assault them. The victim told police they thought they "[were] going to get in trouble as they thought it was their fault for letting this happen."

Due to medical issues, both victims were reportedly younger than their biological age. Police said.

Cota initially told police he was "completely innocent" and the contents of the recorded call were "what they wanted to hear. Subsequent to being placed under arrest at his home residence, the affidavit states Cota "began to talk of his biological father and said that he was in jail for physically and sexually assaulting him during his early childhood."

Cota is required to register as a sex offender and undergo a psychological evaluation.



The ribbon is cut on Hardwick's new community center at the Pavilion on Atkins Field on September 28. Pictured at the ceremony are some of the more than 200 people who helped build the Pavilion. Back (from left): Tom Gilbert (third from right) inside Pavilion structure described the new structure as a "massive lift-and-toss" for all hands.

## Atkins Field Pavilion Opens with Ceremony

By Doug McClure

**HARDWICK** The opening ceremony for the Pavilion on Atkins Field took place on Saturday, Sept. 28, marking the final major step in a multi-year community project funded by the Center for our Agriculture (CAE).

CAE Community Programs Manager Bethany Dunlap spoke at the event, describing the Pavilion as "an effort to showcase the power of community, with a focus on building connections between the town's older and younger generations. Black Dirt Farm's Tom Gilbert echoed that sentiment, and described the Hardwick community as "so vibrant and articulate." The Pavilion provides the town with a community common space that until now has been lacking, Gilbert said.

Shawn Union student Bailey Sheppard, one of several youth speakers at the event, detailed the ways in which the Pavilion helps connect students to the community. Hardwick Elementary student Anderson Williams described how the Pavilion's diverse educational opportunities have influenced his school's curriculum and inspired his family to roll up their sleeves. "My dad has a garden, my mom has a garden, and I have a garden," Williams said.

The ceremony also paid tribute to the many cultures of people whose historical contributions shaped the town. In honor of the Abenaki, a Native American tribe that once populated the region, Nando Jaramillo, of Mohonk and Stars Farm, provided a lesson in the traditional corn empanadas and white scallop squash, similar to that grown by the tribe. Buttricks were served in honor of the French-Canadian ancestors who walked and worked on the property, and, for dessert, giambelli, Italian-style cookies placed with maple, were shared in honor of the Italian-American granite scalars who helped put Hardwick on the map.

The Pavilion's structure was built by Michael Maher of Green Timber Works, who described the project as "a dream come true for a timber farmer," and one of his biggest projects to date. "It's nice

to build a structure that a whole community can enjoy, can see, and visit again and again," Maher said.

"It's incredibly exciting to see this community project come together and have people here to celebrate today." CAE executive director Jon Renshaw said.

Many of the hundreds of people who helped build the Pavilion also took part in the ceremony. Among those not present was Scott Davis of West Barre, a major contributor

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LauraLee Sweeney (left) of Craftsbury is the new director of the Hardwick Area Food Pantry. Since Aug. 4, Tina Williams (right) of Hardwick has been the pantry's assistant at the time.

## Sweeney Named Food Pantry Director

Hardwick — The Hardwick Area Food Pantry (HAFP) has named LauraLee Sweeney of Craftsbury as its new director.

Sweeney, a Northeast Kingdom native, has a background in psychology and social services with a focus on nutrition and agriculture.

Also joining HAFP's Hardwick team are former volunteer Tina Williams as operations assistant. Williams will help develop and implement new and off-

spring programs.

The HAFP is a multifaceted program that responds to food insecurity. It serves Hardwick and surrounding towns. Hours of operation are Monday noon to 2 p.m., and Thursday and Saturday 9 to 11 a.m. For more information about the pantry's programs and opportunities call (802) 472-8940 or email director@hardwickareafoodpantry.org

## Board Considers CUD Option

By June Pichel Cook

**CRAFTSBURY** — A presentation on increasing broadband access in the Northeast Kingdom was made to the select board at its last meeting by Katherine Sims, director of the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative. The presentation comprised an overview of Communications Union Districts (CUD) and how Craftsbury could become part of such a district.

Sims said CUDs are similar in organization to waste management districts, and are comprised of two or more towns. The purpose of a CUD is to plan, maintain, and operate broadband infrastructure to provide high-speed internet to residents of the member communities. A CUD would have representation from the member towns, and the capacity to raise money through grants, bonds, and loans.

Sims asserted that internet connectivity has become as necessary to our lives as electricity. "You are not alone," Sims said. "Every town in the Northeast Kingdom faces this problem."

Current broadband speeds are limited by the Federal Communications Commission as a minimum of 25 Megabits per second (Mbps) download and 3 Mbps upload (Gbps). More than 50 percent of addresses in Craftsbury have access to 25 Mbps download through the work of Kingdom Fiber (K/FiberNet) and grants received by the town's Broadband Committee.

Sims and Craftsbury could also expand the network to reach other residents through wireless technology. The CUD could manage or take ownership of the fiber lines which the town currently owns.

The NEK Collaborative is a working group. Sims said and

wants to "reach all towns in the Northeast."

The NEK website indicates CUD membership poses no financial risk to the town or individual taxpayers.

"Any and all costs associated with the investment in communications infrastructure are not borne by the taxpayers of district members," the website states.

NEK's goal is that every business and residence will be able to access a minimum speed of 100 Mbps at an affordable price.

In a recent, Sims stated that "if the CUD will raise funds through grants and loans to build out the network, that could mean being an all-butler network (as EC Fiber in central Vermont has done) but it could also mean adding some wireless internet options — it depends on what is most cost-effective to reach residents."

Wireless internet service delivery is challenging due to Vermont's mountainous geography, and obstacles to establishing high-speed internet services are similar to those faced in development of rural areas. Sims said: "The cost of building aerial fiber (fiber strung between phone poles rather than buried underground) is \$15,000 to \$20,000 per mile, and even on a two-mile route, it's higher because of low rural population densities. Sims explained.

Current regulations do not require internet providers to serve every home. According to Sims' presentation, pole owners are required to complete the necessary work, but utilities are "regularly misused with no consequences."

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A barn on Wolcott Street in Hardwick was photoed by Vanessa Fournier on the east end and the back side of the building. The driver is credited for CUD by the Hardwick Police Department after failing a blood sobriety test.

## Stannard Begins Town Plan

By Doug McClure

**STANNARD** — The first town meeting about Stannard's new Stannard Planning Commission was held at the town hall on September 25.

The meeting was scheduled in part to discuss responses to a high speed internet service survey, but the survey was sent to residents with property tax notices they have only just started to receive.

The commission noted how much has changed since the previous plan was drafted in 2011. Members present at the meeting — Chair Melissa Moffitt, Joseph Groszler, Johannes Polesberg and John Reynolds — held a free-form discussion underlining the need for significant revisions to the older plan.

Stannard is the first town holding a town plan in 2019. For example, the Black Dirt Farm purchased eight years ago by Tom Gilbert is now a regionally recognized, large-scale composting operation and a major participant in the community. Other requirements will result in the Act 4600 administration merger of the smallest school district — including Stannard — which left many residents anxious about future changes of the merger, which may affect property taxes, must be addressed in the new town plan.

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## Stannard Begins Town Plan

Another significant development is the importance of broadband internet services. Most towns now report strong telecommunications infrastructure as a prerequisite for economic development. Based on geography alone, Stannard is not ideally positioned for high speed internet service; the commission noted. To the east, Wheelock is one of ten NEK towns investigating forming a communications union district for broadband, but Wheelock and Stannard

SEE PLAN 3.

## Hardwick Electric to Participate in Electric Cars/Heating

By Michael Bielawski

**HARDWICK** — Hardwick Electric Department (HED) is taking measures to implement the state's Renewable Portfolio Standards (RPS). The RPS, which local electric utilities are required to comply with, includes providing electric alternatives for heating and transportation.

"By 2032, the Department of Public Services (DPS) has the requirements will result in the Act 4600 administration merger of the smallest school district — including Stannard — which left many residents anxious about future changes of the merger, which may affect property taxes, must be addressed in the new town plan.

utilities including HED, is responsible for implementing RPS standards, said Gina Campbell, chairperson for the Hardwick Electric Board.

"We're not sure if we try to figure out how to do it," Campbell said. "We're in very good shape because we have the dams in Wolcott and that is really significant."

The town is also planning the H11 project, 10-second solar lar installation at a gravel pit on streets next year.

VPSS's website outlines a \$1.8 million on-site solar and electric (EV) unit up to \$600

back for a plug-in hybrid, Campbell said. Rebates of \$300-\$400 are available with the purchase of an electric heat pump.

"But not everyone agrees that new technologies will improve the environment or lower energy costs. HED manager Mike Sullivan noted that Vermont is not a great place for heat pumps. When it gets as cold as it does here, a (new pump) becomes super inefficient."

Another challenge is cost. The purchase price for a new EV is approximately \$30,000, even with a \$7,500 federal tax credit (now \$3,750 for some manufacturers, including Chevrolet).

"There are other environmental concerns that I don't think get spoken enough," Sullivan said,

adding that EVs continue to suffer from range limitations. EVs are fine for a trip from Craftsbury to Hardwick and back, Sullivan said, but not for hunting trips in a large pick-up truck across the state.

"Heat pumps are a long way from being mainstream," Sullivan said.

America Smith, director of Vermonters for a Clean Environment, said there is no guarantee that grid power is mostly renewable.

"On a sunny day, when it's peak-load (highest energy demand) in the region, and there's more than 70 percent natural gas in the mix [for grid power], when people think they're using clean

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