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photo by Michael Bielawski
Residents and the select board gathered in the Cabot school gym to discuss town business, including emergency services, on Cabot Town Meeting Day, 2019.

Town Votes to Keep High School Open

by Michael Bielawski

CABOT – The Town of Cabot voted on Town Meeting Day to keep its small high school open for at least another year. The vote count was 279 to 188.

The item was on this year's meeting ballot, to close down grades 9-12 in the K-12 system. Had the article passed, students would have attended high school in other communities under school choice and Cabot taxpayers would have had to pay the tuition.

Hours before the polls closed, Chris Tormey, school board chair, spoke with the Gazette about the vote.

"I hope they do (keep it open)," he said. "I'm not going to make any predictions. I know the town is reluctant to have large tax increases, and it would require a significant tax increase to close the school and tuition students out."

A primary talking point against the closure was that early estimates have the cost of tuitioning to be $424,000 more than keeping the high school open. That would increase the tax rate by an estimated 20 percent, which would put pressure on the remaining K-8 system.

"Given the reluctance of people in town to raise taxes, I think there would be a lot of pressure to do away with some of the existing K-8 programs for the tuition of the high school students," he said.

Currently there are only 39 students enrolled in the high school. Some of the perks of the small school include its project-based learning initiative, which emphasizes hands-on learning over classroom repetition. The program started years ago and continues to develop.

"Kids learn best when the work is real," former principal David Schilling told the Gazette in 2017. "It's an opportunity to work with adults in various community projects."

Tormey noted today this program is still a big part of the Cabot experience.

"We have this year gone much more comprehensively into using project-based learning as our curriculum model in the high school," he said. Tormey gave the example of a science/music project in which students would build their own instruments and learn the science of the acoustics. In the end, they perform a concert with their own custom-built instruments.

Tormey said there are other advantages to having a smaller school. "I think the positive to having such a small school, you get a great deal of attention," he said. "It's pretty hard to hide anybody in a school of 40 students.

"They get some amazing skills and maturity and being able to talk and learn from adults."

Two years ago the community voted 207 to 183 against a district merger with nearby Danville and Twinfield schools. Part of that proposal was to close down the high school. Around that same time, there was talk about the high school becoming a private academy and keeping grades K-8 as is.

The district is still under pressure to engage in a school merger in accordance with Act 46, the state's school merger law.

Town Meeting Day Focuses on Ambulance and Fire Services

by Michael Bielawski

CABOT – Ambulance and fire services were the big discussions at the 2019 Town Meeting Day which drew a few hundred residents into the school gym on Tuesday morning.

The town is in the initial planning phases for a new fire station and this year's budget will include a $22,000 payment on a piece of land acquired for a new building. The land is on the south side of town down the hill on Main Street across from Cabot Creamery.

The current facility is several decades old and in terms of space and functionality, according to the chief Walter "Skip" Schilling, it is inadequate for the department's current needs. It is also out of compliance with a number of state rules.

A new facility would also allow for a decontamination room to better mitigate the negative health consequences of working with equipment that's been covered in soot from burning homes.

"They're all plastic today," he said after the meeting regarding modern building materials. "When that burns, the cancer-causing carcinogens in that smoke is so much deadlier than wood burning."

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No Grounds for Act 46 Preliminary Injunction

by Doug McClure

ST. ALBANS – Superior Court Judge Robert A. Mello declined the motion for Plaintiffs in the Act 46 appeal against the state. The filing focused almost entirely upon the state's standards for an injunction. Mello based the 10-page filing detailing his reasoning, in which he concluded:

"On balance, the Plaintiffs have not demonstrated their entitlement to a preliminary injunction. The Plaintiffs have not shown a substantial likelihood that they will prevail on the merits of their claim that the Board's actions in implementing Acts 46 and 49 are unconstitutional, and their claims of irreparable harm are speculative. The factors of potential harm to others and public interest appear at best neutral. Even assuming the Plaintiffs will suffer some relevant harm in the absence of a preliminary injunction, the current record suggests that the issuance of a preliminary injunction also may adversely affect others who are not party to the suit. Accordingly, the Motion for Preliminary Injunction is denied."

Mello briefly touched on some areas of the appeal, stating "any alleged effect on residents' taxation in a particular town, at this point, is unclear. As the State points out, the Default Articles of Agreement specifically permit newly merged members to examine and vote on redistribution of any transferred debt. Finally, the Plaintiffs have not carried their burden of showing that that debt and assets would become so tangled that adequate and required record keeping and accounting would not permit the Court to fashion a remedy which would restore the financial status quo, should Plaintiffs eventually prevail on some or all of their claims."

Mello did not address that the Default Articles of Agreement contain provisions, many of which are financial and cannot be amended by voters or new union districts. In Orleans Southwest United Elementary School District's (OSUESD) articles of agreement, for example, Article 8, which deals with financial transfers, such as transfer of debt, is among over a dozen that can only be amended by the General Assembly.

Attorney David Kelley for the parties seeking an appeal on forced mergers said he believes "we have a strong case and I look forward to having the case heard on its merits."

He added that it is his belief "that ultimately these issues [forced mergers] will wind up with the Supreme Court."

Voters Approve Budgets and Roof for Reservoir

by Jorian Page

HARDWICK – About 100 town residents met in the Hardwick Elementary School gym at 10 a.m. on Town Meeting Day. Fewer remained by 12:30 p.m., when the meeting adjourned, but from start to finish, a feeling of comaraderie and commitment to the town remained.

Voters approved the following: Article 8, Hazen Union School District #26 budget for $6,074,687; Hardwick Article 7 general obligation bonds for $420,000 to construct a replacement roof on Bridgman Hill Reservoir; Select Board terms for Eric Remick, Lucian Avery and Shari Cornish; Town Clerk and Town Treasurer terms for Alberta Miller; Hazen Union School District #26 director term for Amy Rosenthal Holloway; Hardwick Town School District director term for Jennifer Laundry and one at-large term; Hardwick Town School district director for Katharine Ingram and Kevin Moore, Jr.

Town Manager Shaun Fielder presented a state of the town review and took questions. The town increased its capital reserve fund balance by $42,301 to $450,000, or about 13 percent of the town budget, up from the previous year's 12 percent. "The industry standard is 15 percent, so the town is moving in the right direction in keep increasing the fund balance to help pay for emergencies," Fielder said.

The road crew has almost finished fixing three culverts from the Memorial Park area to behind Dona's Car Store to help complete the LVRT. The town will perform additional work relating to the trail this year. Select Board Chair Eric Remick said these expenses come out of the road crew budget, but will help leverage hundreds

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photo by Vanessa Fournier
Woodbury Town Clerk Diane Meluso (left) and select board members Michael Gay (center) and Allen Stanley (right) listen attentively as Woodbury residents voice their opinions.

Surprise Threatens Rift in Village

by Doug McClure

WOLCOTT – Town meeting was packed with attendees and for the majority of the time every article before voters was met with unanimity. The town's $1,457,182 budget passed unanimously and, despite resident Bill Cotter's prediction some people might take exception to Lamoille County Sheriff's $220,210 request, barely a murmur was heard. At a certain point, describing the meeting's unanimity, moderator Jim Hester-Ingram joked "This is no fun anymore."

Many in the audience were especially warm to the town's dedication of its town report to longterm and beloved resident Bruce Ward, who passed last year. The town's road crews also received thanks from many in the audience for working to keep even the most challenging roads in Wolcott clear this winter. The town and select board were recognized for making the late-tax policy less draconian. Boy Scouts from troop 827 led in the presentation of the colors and the Pledge of Allegiance. Throughout the entire proceedings, students from the school ran back and forth to get food from the Red White and Stripes cafe.

However, a big surprise to many in attendance was beginning to cause people to whisper. Instead of the normal Article 2 to elect a Town Clerk, with everyone expecting current Town Clerk Linda Martin, who has held the post for 32 years, to be the sole candidate, a second name was on the list: former Assistant Town Clerk Belinda Clegg who had been the assistant town clerk for 29 years, until the previous day. When asked by a resident, Clegg said "I was fired as the assistant town clerk."

Martin declined comment beyond saying "It's a personnel matter."

The mood of the meeting deteriorated amid surprise and confusion about Clegg's dismissal from some in the audience. Nonetheless, paper ballots were cast, and Martin won the vote, 87-42.

Bill Cotter summed up what many in the audience were saying. "This meeting has become very not-Wolcott," he said. "I'm concerned about this going forward, not just in terms of (town) operations but also community."

"This is a small town," moderator Hester-Ingram noted. "We really should get along."

Martin pointed out that, under state law, it is the voters that elect her, and the select board has neither say nor oversight.

Select board Vice Chair Kimberley Gravel said the board has been advised by counsel not to speak on the matter.

Chair Eric Fure said in regard to an unrelated matter that the way Wolcott's government is set up is antiquated, and the select board has been looking for some time now on how to make it a more administrative one, as in other Vermont towns. Fure cautioned that the change is a very complicated one.

The voters also approved creating a capital reserve fund with a one-time $20,000 deposit from the budget this year with additional deposits from future budgets, with the objective of minimizing the amount of borrowing for capital improvements.

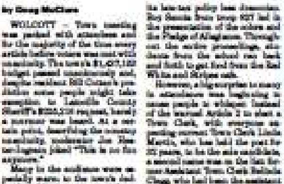

photo by Will Walters
Marshfield Assistant Fire Chief Darrell Bochetter (right) accepts an award for 30 years of service from presenter Will Schwarz as Fire Chief Tim Ackley (left) looks on.

Craftsbury Voters Dispatch Warning in Record Time

Jane Pichel Cook

CRAFTSBURY – In just 2-3/4 hours, voters sailed through the annual warning with almost unanimous approval of all 19 articles. Less than six percent of eligible voters showed up at 9 a.m. in the Craftsbury Academy gymnasium to authorize the expenditure of $1,751,302 from property taxes.

The most discussion generated came from Good Neighbor Fund expenditures, which are not property tax dollars and represented $24,000 in requests.

Select Board Chair Bruce Urie explained that the $561,100 in Article 4 for municipal operations and highway maintenance increased with the cost of road salt, which jumped to $18 per ton. "We were shut off on salt allotment from the state as of last Friday," Urie said. "We won't be using as much salt on the roads." Balloting resulted in 118 Yes to 8 No votes.

Urie explained large potholes in the Village bridge would be addressed when weather warmed. Bridge repair was put back a year because a structural engineering report is needed before applying for state grant money. The engineer, engaged to do the work over a year ago, is not able to begin it. The town is working with another engineer, and the bridge decking replacement should happen next year.

Fire Chief Eric Bettcher spoke to the Craftsbury Volunteer Fire Department's request for $80,600. He explained the budget increase was primarily due to a need to replace air bottles that firefighters use. After 15 years, the air tanks, which have a 4000 psi, cannot be used or inspected. The department has 24 air bottles and has a 3-year plan to replace eight tanks each year at a cost per tank of $800 to $900. New officers of the department were recognized. Balloting resulted in 117 Yes and 8 No votes.

Under Article 6, five town entities sought $7,300 in funding. The article passed unanimously on voice vote with no discussion.

Article 7, a $12,000 request for the Craftsbury Community Care Center (CCCC), passed unanimously on voice vote. Jenny Sener noted that the CCCC provides a homelike, caring and cheerful place for residents. Costs have increased, but reimbursements from Medicare have remained stagnant. More services are needed.

The Craftsbury Public Library sought $40,000, which was approved by a positive ballot vote of 118 Yes and 10 No votes. Library Trustee President Neil Houston thanked the community for its support and explained the increases in usage and services.

Article 9, a request to raise $26,063 for entities outside of Craftsbury, generated a few questions, but passed with 117 Yes and 8 No votes. Auditor Lisa Sentanero explained the agencies requesting funds make a written report to the auditors indicating the number of Craftsbury residents served and is available from the auditors.

Article 10 passed unanimously on a voice vote. Frank Holden from the Road Safety Committee explained the request for radar signage to be placed in East Craftsbury. The curve on East Craftsbury Road as it approaches the CCCC and preschool in the East Craftsbury Presbyterian Church was determined to be a place "to do something before an accident happens."

Anecdotal reports on the radar signs installed on North Craftsbury and South Craftsbury Road indicates motorists are driving slower. Urie had had doubts about maintenance, but was impressed with the signage, which was relatively maintenance free. The snow has been a problem.

Articles 11 and 12, seeking $4,000 and $6,000, respectively, from the Good Neighbor Fund were addressed by Katherine Sims. The funds represent the town's contribution, and are contingent on two different grants being received.

Article 13, seeking $6,000, would be the town contribution for a $100,000 Craftsbury Trails Recreation Grant through Governor Phil Scott's Vermont Outdoor Recreation Communities pilot grant program. "This is the first

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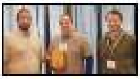
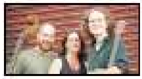
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