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Possible Threat to Community Health Center Funding

by Doug McClure

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Annual federal funding for Community Health Centers (CHCs) like Hardwick Area Community Health Center and Northern Counties Dental Center begins to expire at the end of September. Both are part of the St. Johnsbury-based Northern Counties Health Care, Inc. (NCHC). The Hardwick center originally started in Greensboro and has been serving Hardwick area residents since 1977. The Dental Center opened in 2001 and is one of just three in the three-county region of Caledonia, Essex and Orleans that NCHC serves.

Despite long-running historical annual increases for Community Health Center funding to account for inflation at a minimum, some Democratic representatives and senators have broken with that history over concerns of a possible negative Republican response. Their concern is that Republicans might entirely block funding.

Rep. Frank Pallone Jr. (D-NJ) is chair of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which is proposing keeping the current $4 billion in annual funding at that same amount for fiscal years 2019-2020, what is called "level-funding." Pallone is quoted in a Washington Post interview as saying, "I have to get the Republicans, because this has to be done by the September deadline."

The problem is that "level funding" does not account for the fact that 2019 dollars will not be equal in value to 2020 dollars, due to inflation and other factors. The cost of medical supplies and services will almost certainly increase with inflation over the next four years.

Based on projections from multiple economic sources used by the government, annual U.S. inflation increases of 2.2 to 3% are expected. If those projections are correct, the lack of adjustment for inflation could effectively be a funding cut of $108 million dollars in 2020 and almost a $600 million decrease by 2025.

For most of the past eight years, lawmakers have made funding increases of $200 - $700 million dollars per year.

Vermont's federally-funded CHCs served 175,858 Vermonters in 2017, including 49% of the state's uninsured, according to the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC). Hardwick Area Health Center provides a large spectrum of services beyond basic primary care, such as behavioral health services, and also is an integral part of Vermont's plan to combat opioid abuse. There is staff on hand at 100% of Vermont's CHCs to handle medication-assisted treatment and 91% are staffed for behavioral health services, according to the NACHC.

The Hardwick Area Health Center had 13,048 patient visits and the Dental Center 7,538 in the past fiscal year, according to NCHC Chief Financial Officer Thomas J. Pitts. He said the federal funding accounts for 20% of NCHC's funding for primary care.

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photo by Vanessa Fournier

Caleb Messier (center) of Mountainside Excavation [illegible] concrete down a chute as his dad Shawn Messier (not shown) runs an excavator July 23 at the Hardwick Historical Society Circa 1902 Depot. Helping with the new foundation is Ashton Allen (left) of Round Knoll Concrete.

Opportunity to Keep History Alive for Future

by Doug McClure

HARDWICK – Some may have heard the Historical Society is undergoing paintwork for the first time since 2004, and others may have seen what looks like some sort of foundation work at the back end. That foundation work is actually the inception of something much bigger: a long-hoped-for improvement to the Hardwick Historical Society (HHS)'s document storage so those documents are preserved for future generations.

The upgrade is made possible in part by a bequest last summer from Eleanor Angell. Angell gave the HHS $80,000, in addition to valuable historical items after her passing, which is nine times the normal annual operating costs of HHS. In honor of Angell's generosity, the HHS will name the new room "The Angell Room."

At the time of the bequest last spring, HHS President Elizabeth Dow said, "It feels miraculous." The miracle in this particular case is an opportunity to properly protect and preserve precious historical items in a manner appropriate to their significance and consistent with professional best practices. The problem HHS has faced with its current Depot location is, ironically, its historical condition. The building largely has neither heating nor cooling, meaning whatever is going on outdoors with the weather temperature-wise is about what is going on indoors.

Fluctuations in temperature can wreak havoc on historical documents, according to Dow. She said that the damage a 78-degree storage temperature can inflict on a newspaper could shorten its lifespan by half, compared to it being stored at 60 degrees. A storage temperature rise of 18 degrees, Dow noted, cuts off another half of the life for a newspaper. That those documents are subjected to the coldest of temperatures also exacerbates the deterioration. She said these facts "haunt her on a warm day."

Of the three sections of the Depot's 170-foot building, just the museum and the HHS working area has proper climate control. That section is just over a third of the building's length. The middle section functions as an education center. The back section, formerly a grain store area, has over the years become "a junk room," Dow said.

Neither of those last two sections has any climate control. With the bequest, a modernization of the Depot is underway. In consultation with preservationists, an architect, engineers and contractors over the long winter, HHS formulated a plan to construct a climate-controlled space which Dow explained will meet best practices standards in more than one way. Just as preservation of the historical documents is critical, so is preservation of the Depot's own historic nature. To accomplish this goal, the consultants advised HHS the best approach was a "room-within-a-room" in the former grain store at the back.

Dow said the committee recognized the immediacy of the problem, given the age of some of its materials and the significance

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photo by Doug McClure

A crowd gathered on Saturday at Mackville Pond for a stargazing community event sponsored by the Hardwick Recreation Committee and the Jeudevine Memorial Library. The brightest dot in the sky is Jupiter. See story, Page 2.

Morgan Churchill's Philosophy of Farming: 'What if?'

CABOT – The 40-year-old dairy farmer and his wife, Jennifer, own Wonder Why Farm, a 230-head operation on a quiet country road in Cabot. His "what if?" way of thinking has helped them transition from milking 35 cows on his father's farm in 2002 to managing a certified organic herd with around 120 milkers on their current farm, which they first leased in 2008, and later purchased from his uncle, Walter (Rusty) Churchill.

It also why he's explored innovative ways to improve herd management and produce high-quality milk more profitably and efficiently, such as through installation of robotic milkers in a new state-of-the-art freestall barn. And it's why he continues to diversify the operation, including growing hemp for the first time this year.

This forward-thinking approach recently led to an unexpected honor, being named the 2019 Vermont Dairy Farm of the Year. The farm is the third one in Cabot to win this award since it was first given out in 1962. Other winners were their neighbors, the Rochfords in 1985, and Jennifer's grandparents, Walter and Sally Goodrich, who farmed in partnership with her dad, Myles Goodrich, in 1987.

The award is presented annually to an exemplary farm by University of Vermont (UVM) Extension and the Vermont Dairy Industry Association (VDIA), in cooperation with the New England Green Pastures Program. The winner is chosen by a judging committee comprised of past recipients of this prestigious award, who interview the finalists about their herd, pasture and

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courtesy photo

Jennifer and Morgan Churchill and their children Nora and Samuel are all smiles after Wonder Why Farm, their 230-head certified organic dairy farm in Cabot, was named the Vermont Dairy Farm of the Year for 2019.

Cabot Farm Wins Top Dairy Award

CABOT – Wonder Why Farm, a 230-head certified organic dairy operation in Cabot, has been named the 2019 Vermont Dairy Farm of the Year. Morgan and Jennifer Churchill were selected for this award for their overall excellence in dairying as well as their innovative ways to improve herd management and produce high-quality milk, including installing robotic milkers in a state-of-the-art freestall barn.

The Churchills currently milk 120 cows in a Galaxy Astrea 20.20 automatic milking system, shipping their milk to Stonyfield Organic in Londonderry, New Hampshire. Daily milk production averages 70 pounds per cow – or 21,000 pounds per year – with 3.8% butterfat and 3% protein. These numbers are attributable to good management practices, not only for cow comfort and health, but also for selective breeding for year-round calving.

The couple bought the farm in 2012 from Morgan's uncle, Walter Churchill, after leasing it for several years, transitioning

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Berry Festival Draws Crowds

by Doug McClure

CRAFTSBURY – On the morning of July 27, Craftsbury Farmers' Market hosted the fourth annual Vermont Blueberry Festival. Over a dozen vendors were on hand, many with blueberry-related products. The number of actual blueberries was limited, the late-running winter has delayed the normal harvest for blueberries. Nonetheless, the crowds turned out in large numbers to honor this important locally-grown berry.

According to Craftsbury Farmers' Market's Larry Bohen, who produced 2019's festival as in past years, "Many more people enjoyed the festival than the last year's festival."

Youngsters had plenty to do. Gordon's Granite Collage, of Groton, which has been featured in Seven Days' series on "Stuck in Vermont" airing on WCAX, played classic music for a bouncy house full of young ones. Blueberry smoothies and ice cream cooled off thirsty visitors, and Chris's Authentic Mexican had blueberry tamales. Other food vendors offered a wide range of blueberry-infused goods, from donuts and bagels to vinegar, honey and coffee.

Another draw was the chance to enter a raffle with drawings totaling $800 worth of "Market Money," which is money redeemable at the weekly farmers' market. Bohen said entries for the drawing came from as far away as California and over two dozen Vermont towns and cities. Twelve-year-old Beth Leslie McAllister, of Albany, a 7th-grader at Hardwick St. Paul's Catholic School, announced the winners from the $800 Market Money pot at just past noon. Prizes ranged from $25-$100 with 15 total given out. Bohen said so many entries were received that McAllister used a shopping basket.

Blueberries are an important

See FESTIVAL, 7

photo by Doug McClure

Hardwick's Alder Heidt, 12, sets up shop to sell his blueberrying wares at the Craftsbury Blueberry Festival on July 27. [illegible] blueberries to entice people to his tent.

NEK Action Plan Promises Broadband Collaboration

by Doug McClure

CRAFTSBURY – For nearly two decades, efforts to deliver broadband internet to the Northeast Kingdom have fallen woefully short. The Federal Communications Commission defines the minimum speed for broadband as 25 megabits per second (Mbps) down and 3 Mbps up. Now, an effort by the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative (NKC) is underway with a more ambitious target: 100Mbps down and up.

The lack of broadband has hindered the NEK's economic development, as often noted in frustrated select board meetings throughout the region. Some businesses, facing inadequate internet infrastructure, have left; others have cited the lack of broadband as a reason to avoid opening offices. Vermont's demographic challenge of an aging population is exacerbated when young people graduating school cannot get jobs because of the lack of technology infrastructure. Attracting younger workers and families to a rural area is more of a challenge when internet speeds (and cell phone service) are far below those offered in more developed communities.

The NKC's just-released 2019 Action Plan says 14 of the 20 most-underserved towns in Vermont are in the NEK, and 20% of the addresses in the NEK cannot get even the most basic internet services. While 73% of the rest of Vermont has internet speeds of 25Mbps/3Mbps or more, under half of the NEK does.

Population density and topography are significant barriers. Many of the communities in Caledonia, Essex and Orleans Counties are small, sparsely populated, and spread out, with mountainous geography adding to the problem. There is very little fiber beyond a state-owned "middle-mile fiber network throughout the region," according to the NKC action plan, "but it is not designed for broadband home internet even though it can serve as a backbone." Another major challenge is cost: the plan estimates the funding needed to reach its goals at somewhere between $600 million and $1.4 billion.

Kingdom Fiber CEO Michael Birnbaum, a volunteer resource for the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative, said that funding through grants is more likely now than in the past and that the situation will improve in coming years.

"There will be significant funding available over the next several years from the feds and from revenue bonds, once new organizations have established financial track records," he said.

The success of NEK Collaborative's Action Plan depends on communications union districts, or CUDs. CUDs are described in the action plan as "municipal entities" which "can bond and raise revenue to design, build, and operate a network." The plan says the fiber infrastructure deployed by CUDs is not a risk to taxpayers. Birnbaum explained that CUDs are prohibited by law from drawing from towns' taxpayer funds.

The original and thus far only operational CUD is now starting

See BROADBAND, 4

FEMA Green Light Needed for Old Store Take-Down

by Michael Bielawski

WOODBURY – Yet again, the select board considered the fate of the old country store and the painstakingly long bureaucratic process involved to bring the building down safely, using a special FEMA grant. This time there was an agreement at the meeting that the building is most likely not going to stand through another snowy winter and if the offices in Boston that work on administering this program do not get this process into gear soon, it is not going to get done before winter comes.

Town clerk Diana Pedland was asked what the updates were for this meeting. She said mostly everything is ready to go including a contractor, but FEMA and its Boston offices need to give a green light. "Nothing," she said. "Actually, I sent another email today. I said that this is ridiculous. For one thing, if we lose our contractor who has already been put off for two months, it's going to cost a lot more, or else we're going to have to go another year and if we have another year, the building is not going to stand."

Board chair Michael Gray agreed with that assessment. "It's not going make it through another winter," he said. Over the years, parts of the roof have already begun to cave in under pressure from heavy snow.

The board discussed possibly getting the Washington representatives involved to get FEMA to nudge the process forward. Pedland said for now, at the time of the meeting, they would focus on local state reps, including Rep. David Yacovone, D-Morristown.

"My understanding is that

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Miranda Transcends