

Yellow Barn Groundbreaking Delayed Until Spring of 2021

by Doug McClure

HARDWICK – As the COVID-19 pandemic drags on, Harwick's adjustments have now impacted the Yellow Barn's groundbreaking, reported town manager Shaun Felder at the regular April 16 select board meeting. Other economic development projects' status is also somewhat muddled now. Felder briefly spoke about the grassroots Neighbor to Neighbor initiative designed to coordinate and orchestrate efforts to make sure everyone in town has their needs met during the pandemic.

Ongoing concerns continue over the pandemic's financial implications. While the town's third-quarter budget was "right where it needs to be," according to Felder, the future is uncertain. "We're looking for water and sewer are lower than anticipated and usage higher than normal."

With the state-of-home order in place and many businesses shut until at least May 15, many residents are experiencing financial strain and the town is aware that this difficulty may impact their ability to pay taxes and sewer bills. Under state statute, the town is "a bit handcuffed at this point" when it comes to property taxes, which are due on

May 10. As noted on the harwick.org website "If you are a Harwick tax payer who has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, we encourage you to reach out to our office after May 1, to discuss your options for payment. If you are able to pay a portion of the balance and need to set up a contract for the balance you can reach out to Amanda Fecteau in the town managers office at amanda.fecteau@harwickvt.org. If repayment is not an option, the final step is to request an abatement of your taxes from the Board of Civil Authority. This board consists of the select board, justices of the peace, town clerk, town treasurer and lenders. Requests are heard at a hearing and the board renders a decision based on criteria for abatement set up by the State of Vermont."

Water and sewer bills are next due on May 15. The town is following state guidance and not disconnecting customers at this time. No abatement process exists for these bills. The town advises customers worried about making these payments to contact alberta.miller@harwickvt.org or tonia.gray@harwickvt.org to discuss payment options.

Discussed, but not resolved, is whether credit card payment would be possible. A number of customers pay their bills with

cash, which is not possible now, so the town is asking bills to be paid by check. Fielder later said that before the pandemic the town was looking into accepting credit cards, but "not able to get a system in place at this time and options including phasers and minuses of implementing this system will be evaluated moving forward." The town has an inflexible date in May to pay a \$2.5m bill for the schools.

As recently as the previous meeting, indications were that enough normalcy might return by the original hoped-for groundbreaking at the Yellow Barn this fall. Felder said now "with everything that's happening around us, as you would imagine, it's impacting a number of aspects on this project. We're planning for a ground-breaking in Spring 2021." He announced an \$80,000 award for the project from the Northeast Economy Heritage Program and said "positive" news about the Economic Development Association application was coming. Other projects were already in limbo. While it seemed possible before to move forward with Lamoille Valley Rail Trail projects that were already funded and ready to go, the pandemic now means "we're not sure how to proceed."



Dana Grenlow is one of several Jeunevine Memorial Library staff members who will be answering calls and emails for the newly-formed Harwick Neighbor-to-Neighbor group. The volunteers will assist the community in

Residents Form Neighbor-to-Neighbor Group

by Doug McClure

HARDWICK – As COVID-19 continues impacting the daily lives of residents, a group of volunteers, in concert with the Town of Harwick, is banding together to make sure everyone stays safe and informed. The organization is dubbed the Harwick Area Neighbor-to-Neighbor Group. By now, most residents will have received a postcard detailing the "grassroots group committed to assisting our community in times of need by coordinating local response efforts and collectively addressing challenges to keep our community strong." The ad-hoc group is also using the town's Google Drive to sign up volunteers and get information out. In a sixteen-page document, volunteers have put together an exhaustive and evolving resource list covering COVID-19 information on almost two dozen topics. People can also contact the group at 802-441-3301.

A focus of the group is "to ensure all community members have equitable access to resources and assistance" drawing on the "resilient community," coordinating efforts among various agencies and organizations, and collaborating with neighboring communities.

The group seeks to solve the early concerns some residents had about disparate and sometimes overlapping

efforts by groups in response to COVID-19. The group is also aware that for some residents the digital tools may not work and is operating a parallel analog program.

Harwick Area Neighbor-to-Neighbor group is still evolving, according to volunteer Helen Beattie, and volunteers are working on numerous efforts around the community. For example, one smaller project the group is working on is sewing masks to make sure every community member who needs a mask has one. Essential workers are prioritized, Beattie said. "We have 20 local community members have volunteered to sew masks, which should be available starting April 27. Beattie said "The Harwick Village Diner and the Harwick Area Food Pantry will be the two distribution spots for the area, starting on April 27. We ask that people request one mask per person until we know that all who need masks have been supplied. People can go to the window at the diner between the hours of 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. The food pantry is open Monday from noon to 2 p.m., Thursday from 9 to 11 a.m., and Saturday from 9 to 11 a.m."

The group's motto is "Stay Safe – Be Kind – We Are Harwick Strong." People looking for information and resources can go to harwickvt.org/resources. Those wanting to volunteer can go to harwickvt.org/form.



Members of the Craftsbury Neighbor-to-Neighbor Risk Factor (from left) Beth Strong, Marie Furnell, Louise Caldwell and Kris Cowie, delivered food to



Finn Burgess does her schoolwork at her desk at home with help from her mom.

School in the Time of Corona: Students Tell Us How They Are Coping

by David Keller

GREENBORO – Charlie Keller is in seventh grade at Hazen Union Middle School. Like students around the country, he is sheltering in place and is now learning from home. Charlie has more time to pursue his passion for reading, but sheltering in place is not a bowl of cherries for Charlie. Stically, he comments, "I miss seeing my friends every day. It gets kind of lonely."

If Charley has a question or a problem with an assignment, he says it is more difficult to communicate with a teacher. He says everything depends on the internet, and "if the internet crashes I have no way to communicate." But Charley has also discovered some silver linings. He has two siblings, but home is still quieter than Hazen Union. He happily reports that, "When doing school from home there is less of that excess noise and I can concentrate harder on solving the math problems."

By way of advice to others Charley offers, "One thing that I find helpful when having school from home is having a schedule. It gives at least a little structure to my day." If Charley had his druthers, though, he would be back at Hazen doing his school work there, among all his friends – even with the added noise.

The Hall family in Greensboro Bend has four children. Joey is 18 and is in early college at NVT at Johnson. Like Charley, he would rather be back at school with all of the face-to-face contact with teachers and fellow students. But Joey is grateful to be able to design her own schedule every day.

Lucas Hall is 11 and in grade six. His experience is just the opposite of Charley's. "I don't miss school," he says, "because it's too hard to concentrate at a place [where] I

am used to doing fun stuff." Like the others, he says, "I would really rather be in school."

Lydia Hall is 14 and in eighth grade. She celebrates the fact that, "I can sleep in for water and sewer are lower than anticipated and usage higher than normal."

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Local Business Community Continues to Adapt

by Michael Bielawski

HARDWICK – In his Monday press conference, Gov. Scott announced plans with Vermonters to have patience as the economy is slowly reeling from the shutdown to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus.

Businesses are in their first few weeks of reopening, limiting restaurants to takeout orders and many retail businesses are curbside pickup. The restrictions have in most cases significantly reduced revenues or, in some cases, shut down businesses altogether.

Terry Cooleth, co-owner of Connie's Kitchen on Main Street, usually gets a lot of walk-in customers who like to check out the items at the shop before they order. Since that's not currently possible, they chose to close down, at least for now.

"When he made his second order, which was that it had to be either curbside or takeout, we decided to stick with it. We had to make the tough decision as to whether or not we should stay open," Cooleth said. "We made the decision to close because obviously we don't have a take-out window. Our business is hard because we have a lot of



Chairs are placed on the tables at Connie's Kitchen in Hardwick since the statewide mandate to close all eating establishments in the public for safety reasons to protect the public from the global COVID-19 virus. All bars and restaurants were ordered to close March 18 and many other businesses are also offering takeout.

Farmers' Markets Are in Limbo with COVID-19

by June Pichel Cook

CRAFTSBURY – As of Monday, protocols guiding farmers' markets across the state, on how they might function, had not yet been released by the Agency of Agriculture. The agency was tasked by Governor Phil Scott to write operative guidelines for farmers' markets during the "Stay Home/Stay Safe" executive order.

Recognizing the need for revenue, the state has expected markets will open during the public health crisis with protocols in place. Scott Waterman, communications director for the agency, said it is hoped to have guidelines soon.

"We understand this is a difficult process," Waterman

said. "This is all about the spread of the virus and slowing it." Farmers' markets had been crafting their own guidelines, which set up concerns that markets were handling the lockdown differently.

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efforts among various agencies and organizations, and collaborating with neighboring communities. The group seeks to solve the early concerns some residents had about disparate and sometimes overlapping

State Education Fund Hit by COVID-19

by Emmett Avery

HARDWICK – Administration and board members of the Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union and Orleans Southwest Union Elementary District recently attended a briefing on the impacts COVID-19 is expected to have on the state's education fund. The bill implicating the state education fund are still up in the air, but the likelihood of revenue shortfalls is significant. The briefing was presented by Mark Perrault, a senior fiscal analyst with the Vermont Legislative Joint Fiscal Office, a non-partisan government organization that provides financial analysis to the legislature.

Perrault said that, based on a recent report from the state economist, there has been a significant downgrade in revenues from consumption taxes dedicated to the education fund, such as the sales and use tax. These revenues make up about one-third of the state education fund's revenue stream with the other two-thirds coming from property taxes.

The combined drop in consumption tax revenue for FY 2020 (the current year) is projected to be \$88.7 million. Legislative Joint Fiscal Office, Perrault said. This shortfall, according to

Perrault, wipes out the stabilization reserve fund and all surpluses initially built into the FY2020 education budget and leaves the state \$39.5 million short. "In some scenarios," Perrault said, "what I am showing you right here is likely a best-case scenario." This, he said, is because revenue streams such as consumption taxes may also be disrupted or delayed.

On the plus side, Perrault said it is estimated that the state will receive \$21 million in federal funding to help offset the loss of FY2020 revenue losses, but it is not

See HIT, 6

See LIMBO, 4