

THE Hardwick Gazette

INDEPENDENT LOCAL NEWS SINCE 1889

Hardwick • Cabot • Calais • Craftsbury • Greensboro • Marshfield • Plainfield • Stannard • Walden • Wolcott • Woodbury

Wednesday, July 8, 2020

Volume 131 Number 27

Electric Bill Controversy Results in Dueling Press Releases

by Emmett Avery

CRAFTSBURY – A nearly yearlong dispute between the Hardwick Electric Department (HED) and Craftsbury Academy recently spilled into the open with dueling press releases and conflicting statements.

The Hardwick Electric Department is trying to recover approximately \$140,000 it claims it is owed by Craftsbury Academy, while the academy's board said the charge is unfair, and that they should not have to pay for a mistake they say was made by the Hardwick Electric Department.

The issue originates in the fall of 2010 when, around the time of significant energy efficiency renovations at the academy, HED installed a faulty electric meter.

The board of the academy has blamed HED for the faulty meter, while HED General Manager Mike Sullivan said that there were two components improperly installed in the meter, one by HED and

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one by a contractor hired by the academy.

The improperly functioning meter ran until HED discovered the issue in the spring of 2019. HED said that upon investigation, they found the meter had registered only 15% of the academy's electricity over the time of its installation.

After a review by the Department of Public Service, the state agency tasked with representing the public interest in disputes with utilities, HED came to Craftsbury Academy with a bill. According to documents from the academy, HED was asking for \$139,019, though this number may have changed more recently. The department presented the Craftsbury School

Board with several payment plans in the fall of 2019, offering to reduce the total bill for faster payment. But the board was not yet ready to pay.

In January of 2020, a lawyer representing the academy wrote a letter to the HED offering to settle the matter by paying HED \$20,000 over three months.

General manager Sullivan said that the settlement proposal was pennies on the dollar, and on behalf of his ratepayers, he could not accept it. He said he reached out to the academy several times over the next few months, but got no response. According to Mr. Sullivan, this lack of response led HED, after consultation with counsel and the Department of Public Service, to issue the academy a bill for \$143,927 and a disconnect notice on March 2, 2020.

The school appealed the disconnect proceedings to the Public Utility Commission, HED's state regulator, where the case now stands. According to filings with the commission, the academy is asking to have the entire charge,

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Community Trust Purchases General Store Building

by Mara Brooks

EAST CALAIS – On June 29, the East Calais Community Trust (ECCT) finalized the purchase of the General Store building on Route 14, the group announced Sunday. The Vermont non-profit was formed last year with the goal of purchasing and renovating the historic building and reopening the General Store, which closed in December. ECCT vice president and co-chair Denise Wheeler said the group is focused on "attracting someone to lease the space" for a new general store that features staple convenience store items, local produce, and high-quality take home meals.

"It's a great spot, it's the only store between East Montpelier and Hardwick," Wheeler said of the building's location. "We want to make it appealing to the folks that were using the general store for bread and milk and general necessities, but we also want to increase its viability by having

some specialty items."

The group's first order of business, Wheeler said, is to remove the old gas tanks outside of the building.

"We'd like to see the gas stay there, but the state says the tanks have to be removed, and to put in new ones would cost anywhere from 80 to 100 thousand (dollars)," she said. "So, what we're hoping to do is increase parking instead."

Removal of the tanks will cost the group between ten and fifteen thousand dollars, Wheeler added.

"We hope the state can come up with some money to help with any remediation work that is needed," she said. "We're working in close concert with the Department of Environmental Conservation to make sure we do things right. We're trying to be good stewards and follow the rules."

The ECCT raised the down payment to purchase the building through a combination of grants and donations, Wheeler said. But

See **BUILDING, 2**



photo by Mara Brooks

The East Calais General Store has been purchased by the East Calais Community Trust, and is set for renovation.