

Selectboard 2020 Town Report

A collection of vital societal issues all seemingly reaching tipping points at the same time, ranging from social justice, racial justice and gender equity to climate change and economic equity, all overlain by a turbulent political environment, a pitched economic downturn and the most virulent pandemic in a century. There are times when it seems the best you can say about 2020 is that it's in the rearview mirror, fading fast. 2021 simply has to be better, right? Whether you're from the "Come together" generation or nearer the "We're all in this together" era, we've seen over this past year the need to find common ground, to work together toward a brighter future for our community, state and nation.

We join with all to express our heartfelt thanks to our first responders, the local doctors, nurses, EMFD staff & volunteers, and all who stepped up in the effort to save lives while battling a foe none fully understood. We extend that thanks to those that kept our community from imploding: Dudley's employees, EMES & U-32 teachers & staff, Alco & Packard fuel deliverers, and so many more. Most of all we give thanks to our community members, who collectively strived to do what was necessary to keep us all as safe as possible. The end of the pandemic may be in sight, but we won't forget the heroism or the simple common decency.

Despite the pandemic, some good things happened in 2020. High on this list was the completion of the East Montpelier Village sidewalk project, the culmination of over a decade of seemingly constant construction work along the US Rte. 2/VT Rte. 14 corridor. 2020 was also a big year for the Cross VT Trail Association, long a recipient of town support. The group closed on an important easement across Fairmont Dairy land and has finally, after years of fundraising, broken ground on the bridge over the Winooski. The East Montpelier portion of the trail, once complete, will serve as a recreational focal point, with access west to the Montpelier trails, east to Plainfield and beyond, and connect with U-32 trails, providing a link to the EM Trails network. One thing that did fall to the pandemic was the formation of the Conservation Commission as authorized at 2020 Town Meeting. We decided to wait out the pandemic to give the commission a better chance for a productive start.

After an unexpectedly busy 2019 due to the multitude of school votes, Town Clerk Rosie Laquerre and the Board of Civil Authority faced a new set of challenges in 2020. After a busy but normal town meeting with the presidential primary, Rosie and the BCA faced the state primary and then the general election under pandemic protocols that necessitated major changes in how the elections were conducted. They handled the altered methodologies with aplomb, maintaining good humor through trying times while managing two clean, successful votes. Early 2021 brings more change, as town meeting will be an all-Australian ballot event. We determined that this one-time shift in town meeting protocol was warranted to protect the health and safety of the community.

The Resilient Roads Committee continues to do great work under the leadership of Jeff Cueto, the committee chair, and Paul Cate, the town tree warden. The committee was formed three years ago to work with the VT Urban and Community Forestry Program (UCF) as a pilot town for the development of updated roadside vegetation management guidelines. The committee has received three grants over the past two years to develop and utilize an ash tree management plan designed to proactively protect the town from the devastation of our ash trees by the Emerald Ash Borer. The Selectboard has committed \$15,000 in FY2022 to support this management effort. While continuing the ash tree work the committee has taken on another project with UCF, once again serving as a pilot town, this time for the development of a shade tree preservation plan, a new state requirement that will determine what town trees the tree warden will have authority over. For its excellent service to the community, the committee was the recipient of the UCF's 2020 Arbor Day award.

Road Foreman Guthrie Perry and our veteran road crew, Ken Lorden, Frank Campbell, and Craig Seadeek, along with part-timer Peter Hill, are a big part of ash tree management projects, serving as support for the committee and its contractors while also handling some of the tree removal when time allows. Along with sustaining its reputation for excellence in maintaining our road network, the crew continued to upgrade our roadside drainage capabilities to combat road erosion and resultant sediment flows into our streams and rivers. A new duty during the 2020/21 winter was sidewalk maintenance as the team mastered the use of a new tractor/snowblower/sander to keep the sidewalk network reasonably pedestrian friendly. The big infrastructure project for 2021 will be the repaving of the southern-to-middle section of County Road along with the replacement of two large culverts just south of Morse Farm and just north of Barnes Road. The County Road improvements are supported in part through a variety of VTrans grants.

The FY2022 budget reflects a mostly balanced, no growth approach coupled with two Selectboard policy determinations, the ash tree management program discussed above and EMFD staffing described in the next section, pushing the overall budget marginally higher. The general fund budget is up 2.4%, and overall expenditures, including projected appropriations for all voted articles (up 7.4%, mainly due to renewed, after skipping a year, appropriation requests from the EM Signpost and EM Trails), are up 2.6%. This overall expense increase of 2.6% coupled with revenue growth of 0.34%, the use of \$100,000 of our available fund balance and a projected 0.33% rise in the grand list results in a municipal tax increase of 3.2%, about 1.8 cents on the tax rate. The capital planning process led by the Capital Improvement Committee continues to provide the board with the flexibility to meet the needs of the town without wild swings in the tax rate. In 2020 we were able to make cash purchases of a new grader, a new zero-turn mower for cemetery maintenance, the sidewalk tractor/snowblower and a used 6-wheel truck to stabilize our fleet's capabilities. These necessary purchases were accomplished without affecting the long-term capital plan and with no increase in capital reserve funding.

Once again, the single biggest driver of the projected tax rate increase is the EMFD ambulance service budget, our share of which is up \$33,159. For the most part, this figure reflects the year 2 contribution toward a three-year effort by your Selectboard and the Calais Selectboard to move toward fully funding 24/7, 2-person per diem staffing for the EMFD ambulance service. For FY2021 & FY2022 the EM per year share of this effort was \$25,000 plus associated payroll costs. The FY2023 cost will likely be over \$50,000. As stated last year, it's been clear for years that dependence on volunteer staffing was an unsustainable proposition. The expectations on volunteer personnel, both in terms of training and time, are enormous, leading to a downward spiral of fewer volunteers trying to meet constantly increasing demands.

Bruce Bjornlund closed his law practice last June, ending a run of 35 years as our town attorney. Although he sat on numerous volunteer committees over the years, it is his sterling professional advice, guidance and judgment for which he will be best remembered. It is never easy to act as the lightning rod in contentious times, but he did what was necessary to serve the best interests of his client – our community. In happier times, he kept us on solid ground with his commonsense approach to the many legal pitfalls facing municipal governance. We thank him profusely for his meritorious and deeply appreciated work on our behalf.

Stay safe and we hope to see you all at 2022 Town Meeting!

Seth Gardner, Chairperson
Amy Willis

Carl Etnier, Vice-chairperson
Jon Jewett

Judith Dillon