

MOUNTAIN GAZETTE

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Communities of Jericho Underhill salute Veterans

Scouts and veterans hold flags during Memorial Day services Monday at Pleasant View Cemetery in Jericho. Bottom right: Air Guard Maj. Jeff Rector of Jericho speaks to hundreds of people at the cemetery.



PHOTOS BY TED TEDFORD

E-Cambridge – Hoping for broadband

By Phyl Newbeck
Special to the Mountain Gazette

Twelve rural communities in Vermont have been chosen for the e-Vermont Community Broadband Project. Cambridge is one of the towns selected for this pilot program which will provide communities with digital tools and in-depth training. The goal is to help Cambridge make better use of the internet which, in turn, may lead to improved provision of social services, increased civic involvement, job creation, and help for Cambridge Elementary School and Varnum Memorial Library.

Despite its name, the pilot program will not be bringing broadband to those areas of Cambridge which do not have high speed internet. Rather, the goal is to create sufficient interest in broadband to convince one of the area's providers to expand service. Michael Moser, a member of the Cambridge Planning Commission and a Research Specialist at UVM's Center for Rural Studies is the lead contact for Cambridge. Moser said that inside and immediately abutting the villages of Jeffersonville and Cambridge there is high speed internet, but people living beyond those centers have "terribly, terribly slow" dial-up.

Moser said the broadband proposal was spearheaded by Dennis Shanley, Communications Director for Cambridge Crossroads. In 2008, Cambridge participated in the Place-based Landscape Analysis and Community Education (PLACE) program under the auspices of UVM and Shelburne Farms. The program brought together diverse members of the community and resulted in several concrete endeavors including Cambridge Crossroads; a website and newsletter providing community information. Shanley submitted the pre-proposal and was part of the committee that completed the final application which included 23 letters of support from people of all walks of life throughout the community.

Moser said internet providers have no incentive to extend service down dirt roads to a handful of houses if nobody in those houses has expressed a desire for service. The e-Cambridge program hopes to increase demand by helping residents understand what high speed internet service can do for them. To accomplish this goal, the committee will hold community-wide meetings to identify ways in which residents might benefit from the project. The Planning Commission will partner with Cambridge Crossroads for a series of forums to gauge interest in potential improvements such as a town website or the creation of WiFi hotspots. "The key step," said Moser "is getting people interested. The more we engage the better things will be. It's very exciting to be part of this ongoing process."

Shanley has been interested in expanding broadband service throughout Cambridge ever since he worked as a consultant for Vermont Electric Co-op eight years ago. There was some discussion about having the Co-op provide broadband to underserved

areas, similar to their work providing electricity to rural areas in the 1930's. Shanley said he learned that the crucial equation for communications companies is customers per mile. The Co-op currently serves 9 1/2 to 10 customers per mile but large commercial companies look for 14 to 15. Shanley said Vermont historically has a lower penetration of users with access to broadband than the rest of the country, meaning that many who have the option of high speed internet do not take advantage of it. Shanley hopes to use Cambridge's participation in the pilot program to show that residents who don't currently have access would definitely use high speed internet.

Shanley said that funds associated with the grant can be used to improve the Cambridge Crossroads website. Although he hopes the town will create its own municipal site, Cambridge Crossroads will continue to be the repository for non-governmental groups. Front Porch Forum may also expand into Cambridge as part of the pilot program. Middle school students with low socio-economic status might receive free Netbooks under the grant and Shanley would like to see community volunteers teach the kids to use them. The grant may also provide new computers for the Varnum Memorial Library and adult education computer classes at the Technical Center. Shanley hopes to further formalize Cambridge's broadband committee of which he is a founding member, possibly joining forces with the towns of Waterville and Belvidere.

Forty municipalities applied for the pilot program. In addition to Cambridge, Brighton, Bristol, Canaan, Grand Isle County, Ludlow, Middlesex, Newport, Poultnery, Pownal, Sunderland, and West Rutland were selected. The Vermont Council on Rural Development will oversee the program. Helen Labrun Jordan is the Project Director for e-Vermont. She said that one of the reasons the Cambridge application rose to the top was that they had already put together a broadband committee with representation from different organizations throughout the town. Additionally, Cambridge could point to examples of active projects which promoted community development. Lastly, Cambridge was able to articulate a plan for their participation in the program and showed enthusiasm for projects which might lead to enhanced internet services in town.

Shanley noted that broadband often raises a "chicken/egg" problem. Modern businesses won't move into an area that doesn't have broadband, but cable companies won't expand into areas without a high volume of traffic. Shanley hopes that by increasing internet use among those with access to high speed, communications companies will be willing to expand another few miles so that more people have access. Shanley believes Cambridge has an obligation as one of the pilot towns: "Everyone else will be looking at what we do," he said. "We're in the spotlight and we have to perform."

Rebuilding Bolton Notch Road

By Phyl Newbeck
Special to the Mountain Gazette

On Town Meeting Day the voters of Bolton approved spending \$382,000 to rebuild a section of Bolton Notch Road. That job is due to be completed by early June and hopefully, it will get to the root of the problem which has plagued the road for years.

Town Engineer Mike Weisel said 4,000 feet of road is being improved; the section leading from the interstate to the top of the steep hill. Eight hundred feet are being rebuilt, 1,200 feet are being widened, and the remaining 2,000 will be tuned up. The rebuilding is the largest part of the job, requiring the removal of ledge and replacement of existing culverts with new ditching. The tune-up section also involves ditching and culverts.

Weisel had estimated the job would cost \$190,000. The town received nine bids; the high bid was \$250,000 but the low bid from Dirt Tech, a Jericho based company, was only \$125,000. Tim Cole, owner of Dirt Tech, was pleased to be selected for the job. Regarding the low bid, he said, "You just go over your budget with a fine tooth comb and hope everything goes well."

Select Board Chair R. J. Vallie is pleased with the progress on the road. At this point, the biggest challenge is a telephone pole which will have to be moved for the road to be widened. Green Mountain Power has been called so the project should proceed on time. Cole expected that the pole would be moved by the time the Mountain Gazette goes to press.

Weisel lauded Notch Road residents for their patience during the road work, but had particular praise

Take part in the LACiNg Up for Cancer Walk



Debbie's No Limit Angels, a team of family and friends from the Jeffersonville/Cambridge area, participated in last year's LACiNg Up For Cancer walk. This year's walk is scheduled for June 26 at the People Academy track in Morrisville. Last year's walk raised \$135,000 for Lamoille Area Cancer Network's emergency fund - a fund that provides grants for cancer patients in the Lamoille Area. Get involved! Volunteer, sponsor walkers, or show your support by stopping by on June 26. For more information on how you can get involved in LACiNg Up For Cancer call Kathy Demars at 888-7720 or Jill Baker at 888-8302.

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Westford school budget doomed on revote

By Phyl Newbeck
Special to the Mountain Gazette

On May 18, Westford voters went back to the polls for a revote of the school budget. On Town Meeting Day, the budget of \$5,268,238 squeaked through by a vote of 218 to 207. A successful petition for a revote led to an overwhelming reversal of those numbers; the budget failed by a resounding 403 to 283. Town Clerk Nanette Rogers reported that 48% of those registered to vote came out for the special election, second only to the 49% who voted on whether to form a unified school district with Essex in the fall of 2007.

Rogers wasn't surprised by the volume of voters; opponents of the budget undertook a postcard campaign to inform citizens about the impending vote and there were some lively discussions on Westford's Front Porch Forum. When she began receiving requests for absentee ballots, Rogers printed up 850 ballots in preparation for the election.

Conrad Racine was one of the residents who led the petition for a revote. "The people have spoken," he said. "My concern is that the School Board won't listen. We just have to wait and see." Racine said many residents had been unaware of the tax implications of the proposed 1.4% budget increase. "We're not overjoyed about doing this," he said, "but many people in this town, especially those who are retired and didn't get an increase in Social Security, are tired of this. Nobody is paying attention to them." When Racine submitted the petition, it was believed that the 1.4% increase would lead to a 10% increase in taxes. However, since the State Legislature chose not to increase the statewide property tax that number is down to 7.4%.

Racine wasn't comfortable giving a figure for what he would consider an acceptable budget. He would like to see the School Board recommend that Westford teachers forgo a raise this year. "There's a feeling that we're not all in this together," he said. "We not mean-spirited people, but we're becoming realistic." Racine is in his late 60's and said he had never experienced an economic downturn as bad as the current situation. He has lived in Westford for 45 years and doesn't recall a school budget ever failing to pass before.

School Board Chair Martha Heath said the School Board will meet at 6:30 on June 1 to determine their next steps. The public is invited, but it is a regular meeting, not a hearing. Heath said she was disappointed with the results of the revote, but not surprised. She noted that at the original public hearing in January, Westford residents were informed that the budget would likely result in a tax increase of 10%. The feedback the Board received was gener-

ally positive, so they felt comfortable going forward with that plan. Heath noted that those opposed to the budget did not attend the informational meeting. Westford School Principal David Wells said he wasn't that surprised by the revote petition given the closeness of the March vote. "People are concerned about taxes," he said, "and there is a great deal of complexity to public school funding. The Westford Board worked hard to create a budget that is sensitive to the needs of taxpayers, but the system is complex and hard to understand." Regarding Racine's request that teachers forgo a raise, Wells noted that labor negotiations are also a complicated process. "I'm sure the teachers in Westford and across Vermont are aware of the pressures of the economy and so is the School Board," he said. "We have to let both parties come to an agreement that is reasonable and works for everyone."

Wells hopes residents will come to the June 1 meeting to provide input. "It would be exceedingly difficult," he said, "to come up with a budget that has no tax increase since that would lead to program cuts at the school." Wells noted that the initial budget did contain funding cuts and spending reductions in a variety of areas. "I'm certain," he said, "that the Board will ensure that they bring the best possible budget forward to consider the needs of both taxpayers and students."

On June 1, the administration will present some ideas, as will members of the Board. Heath said the question of freezing teacher pay isn't as easy as it sounds. This year, teachers at Westford School worked without a contract. By law, they were entitled to their step increases. If no contract is reached by the beginning of next year, step increases will also go into effect as mandated by the Labor Relations Board. In no agreement is reached, the District will hire a fact-finder which may lead to a mediated agreement.

Heath recognizes that there are differences of opinion in the community as to how much the budget should be cut. "It's important for us to get feedback as we develop a new budget," she said. "These are hard economic times and that makes it tougher to try to figure out what percentage of property tax increase people would be willing to support."

Racine praised his fellow citizens for coming out to vote. "It was outstanding voter participation when you consider that the only issue was a revote of the school budget," he said. "I'm proud of the people who turned out to vote regardless of how they voted. Our goal is to get as many or more on the next vote. Even if this had gone the other way, I still would have said 'terrific, the people have spoken'."

work was done before asking the voters to approve the money. "It was very encouraging in this economic climate to see the voters be so supportive," Vallie said. Noting how competitive the bidding process was, Vallie believes the town picked just the right time to make repairs.

Vallie hopes residents haven't been unduly inconvenienced by the road work. The town had hoped not to have to close the road, but needed to do so on two days because of blasting work. Unfortunately, the first day - warned well ahead of time - had to be postponed because of snow. Vallie said that otherwise the road has been kept open, although he has heard that some drivers have had 10-15 minutes of delays. He said the town regrets the inconvenience to drivers, but hopes the improved road will make up for those delays.

Vallie said the project has been able to proceed quickly because all the engineering and preparatory