

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

MARCH 5, 2007

The legal voters of the Town of Ripton met at the Community House in Ripton on Monday, March 5, at 7:30 p.m. to act upon articles one through six of the 2007 Town Warning. There were about 95 people in attendance.

Moderator Joyce Dicianna called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m. She welcomed attendees, reviewed Roberts Rules of Order, and read a "Town Meeting Invocation."

Article 1: Will the Town vote the sum of \$343,019.51 to pay General Fund and Road expenses for the ensuing year, and pay outstanding orders or obligations of the Town, with interest, the tax rate on the 2007 Grand List to be determined by the Selectboard, divided as follows:

Roads, Including Winter Work	\$169,100.00
General Fund Costs	<u>\$173,919.51</u>
Total	<u>\$343,019.51</u>

Article 1 was moved by Tim Hanson and seconded by Rick Klein.

Bill Ford highlighted several items in the budget section of the Town Report:

- He noted an increase in "Town Office Maintenance" and "Community House Maintenance" to upgrade lighting for long-term energy efficiency, an undertaking supported by the Town's Conservation Commission.
- He also noted an amount of \$12,000 budgeted for the Fire Department's new "Vehicle Replacement Fund." In previous years the Town has budgeted \$6,500 for Ripton's "Major Projects Fund" for major road works. In response to the Fire Department's request for funding, the Selectboard proposed to budget \$12,000 annually, an amount to be directed alternately to the "Vehicle Replacement Fund" and "Major Projects Fund." In 2007, the \$12,000 will be directed to the "Vehicle Replacement Fund." This funding is specifically addressed in Article 2.
- The budget reflects increased spending on tax map updating to cover costs of beginning to digitize our maps.
- Finally, there is a proposed \$5,000 increase for road paving in the budget, reflecting increased costs of asphalt.

Mr. Ford then asked if there were questions from the floor.

Barry King asked why the \$12,000 noted above would be allocated to the General Budget versus Fire Department in alternative years—why not allocate \$6,000 for each purpose each year? Laurie Cox replied that the Fire Department felt a strong need for the larger amount, and this would give them a bigger amount up front. Bill Ford added that this funding mechanism had been reached as a compromise. In the future, it is possible that financing could be split annually, although there is currently no such plan.

Warren King stated that past practice has been to cover half of the Town's recycling costs through drop-off fees, but that this percentage has slipped of late due to increased costs. He announced a \$1.00 increase in the drop-off fee, resulting in a \$3.00 fee per drop-off.

Willem Jewett, Ripton's State Representative, addressed the meeting and distributed a Legislative Report he had prepared. He had e-mailed the report to those whose e-mail addresses he had; any townspeople wanting to be added to his list should send him an e-mail. He commented that Ripton is "running on all

cylinders,” a comment prompted by activities of the Broadband Cooperative and the Town’s Alternative Energy Group.

Mr. Jewett’s subsequent remarks addressed the linked subjects of education reform and property tax relief. He noted changes in the tax adjustment (rebate/prebate) system. Taxpayers must file a new form by April 15, and their taxes will be adjusted through the Town’s taxation procedures. Refunds will be applied to a person’s property tax payment.

He stated that the State’s education system is facing real problems, notably with unfunded or partially funded mandates and decreasing enrollments. The problems are receiving a great deal of attention in Montpelier. Mr. Jewett felt townspeople should be aware that there is talk of reducing the threshold at which towns pay a penalty if they spend more than the State average for education per pupil. Previously at 125%, this threshold may be reduced by at least 10%. Such a reduction would prove difficult for towns like Ripton.

Mr. Jewett noted that the Commissioner of Education will be at MUHS on March 13 to present his “Governance Plan” which would reduce the number of school boards. He urged townspeople to attend. Mr. Jewett noted his concern about loss of localized school control.

He also expressed concern with budget caps, saying that over time they accentuate differences between high and low-spending districts—ironically, a situation that education reform means to address. In summing up, Mr. Jewett said there are no easy answers to the education/property tax conundrum, and that property tax reform is exceedingly difficult to achieve.

Jerome Shedd inquired about the chance of passage of the bill reducing the “over average” spending cap to 115%. Mr. Jewett replied he did not know the likelihood of passage, but that he would not vote for it.

Sally Buteau asked who had the idea of condensing school boards. Mr. Jewett replied that the Commissioner was promoting the idea but that it was not new.

Lawrence Miller raised a question about the property tax adjustment system, asking if income sensitivity payment from the State would be to individuals or spread out in a payment to the Town. Mr. Jewett replied that there has been a problem getting people to file the necessary form, and that rebate/prebate amounts would go directly to the tax accounts of individuals.

Mr. Jewett received applause after Joyce Dicianna expressed appreciation for his efforts.

Discussion of Article 1 then resumed.

Charles Billings asked whether the \$12,000 allocated to the Fire Department is the same amount mentioned in Article 2. Bill Ford said that it was, and that the Selectboard felt allocating \$12,000 to the Fire Department and \$6,500 to the Major Projects Fund would be excessive, that fiscal prudence had dictated this approach.

Tim Hanson asked about Middlebury College’s payment shown on page 19 as gift in lieu of taxes—he had understood this would increase incrementally but it appears to decrease. Bill Ford explained that the College makes three types of payment: direct property tax payment, gift in lieu of taxes, and “in kind” services. The tax value of the properties can vary, as when reappraised—if one payment amount goes up, another goes down. The total value still matches the College’s agreement with the Town.

Dick Collitt asked for clarification of the \$4,000 lighting upgrade, commenting it seems quite expensive. Laurie Cox replied that the motivation was not financial savings but rather energy efficiency. Mr. Collitt asked what the payback time would be, and assumed it would be a very long time. Ms. Cox said some funds may be forthcoming from Energy Vermont. Warren King said there would be some rebate on

fixtures. Bill Ford said the payback time might be something like 10 years; Warren King said it might be only several years. Mr. Ford said there will be smaller, energy-efficient lamps with smaller ballast, and that the fixtures in the Town Office are very old. Martha McCaughin referenced future costs of electricity in Vermont when Hydro-Quebec goes offline, and thought savings might be enhanced by those increased costs. Joyce Dicianna reported that lighting replacement at her place of employment had proven a good idea.

Tim Hanson called the question, and Joyce Henderson seconded.

Article 1 was adopted by unanimous voice vote.

Article 2: Will the Town vote the sum of \$39,215 with \$12,000 of this amount earmarked for the Vehicle Replacement Fund to Ripton Fire and Rescue to help pay Fire Department and First Response expenses for the year?

Article 2 was moved by Barry King and seconded by Carol Ford.

Fire Chief Erik Eriksen noted that 911 numbers posted on houses are not helpful when those houses are any distance from the road. He asked that people post their 911 addresses close to the road and in as reflective a medium as possible. He also reminded people to change the batteries in their smoke detectors. Mr. Eriksen told townspeople not to hesitate to call the Fire Department if their carbon monoxide detectors go off. He reported that the Fire and Rescue Department needs volunteers in both the medical and fire-fighting areas.

Dick Collitt asked what the \$12,000 would be spent for. Ed Sullivan replied that there is a pressing need for a new mini-pumper. The current one is a 1976 Dodge which has served its purpose well but is nearing the end of its life; it is difficult to find mechanics to service it, and it does have a cracked frame. The \$12,000 is toward a replacement vehicle should the mini-pumper die. The mini-pumper is needed in order to get up narrow driveways that the tanker and pumper cannot access. Mr. Sullivan said that the reason the mini-pumper has been saved this long is that an ambulance was acquired which took over some of the mini-pumper's functions.

Mr. Sullivan stressed the importance of the mini-pumper as a "first line" piece of equipment for a small community such as ours. He said it may succumb at any moment and will need to be replaced. A Vehicle Replacement Fund will give the Fire Department room to negotiate when and as necessary. Mr. Sullivan stated that in addition to the question of the mini-pumper, the Department will always need equipment of various sorts and needs to be ready for repair/replacements.

Persis Rowe thanked the Department for its assistance when she had a carbon monoxide scare. She also expressed appreciation for their delivery of prescriptions by snowshoe during the recent heavy snows. Alice Clark also rose to thank the Department and remind townspeople that the Department is volunteer and can therefore receive charitable donations. She asked people to consider the Department in their estate planning.

Tim Hanson called the question and Richard Kimler seconded.

Article 2 was adopted by unanimous voice vote.

Article 3: Will the Town have current property taxes collected by the Treasurer, with a tax due date of November 5, 2007?

Article 3 was moved by Barry King and seconded by Ed Sullivan.

Bonnie DeGray asked for definition of current taxes, which was provided by the Selectboard.

Richard Ruane called the question and Jeremy Grip seconded.

Article 3 was adopted by unanimous voice vote.

Article 4: Will the Town of Ripton call upon the Governor and State and Federal Legislators to simplify state and federal permitting to allow for more rapid development of small-scale, environmentally sound hydroelectric projects?

Article 4 was moved by Barry King and seconded by Richard Kimler.

Warren King noted that Representative Willem Jewett had been busy on our behalf, acceding to a request to introduce legislation to facilitate small-scale hydroelectric development. Mr. Jewett and 22 others are sponsoring a bill, H70, which is working its way through House committees. H70 has “lost some of its power” and Mr. King expressed a hope that it would get back on track. Our Senators have pledged support if the bill makes it to the Senate.

Charles Billings noted the need for promoting wind power as an alternative energy source, and asked if there had been any thought of introducing legislation to this end. Mr. King replied that there is also a bill to promote use of alternative energy in general. He said hydroelectric development is a particular problem because it needs Federal water permits which are onerous to obtain and can take 10 to 15 years. The hope is that small-scale hydroelectric permitting can be removed from the purview of the Federal government and put in State hands. That being the ultimate goal, the first step is to get the State engaged in such a change.

Bonnie DeGray noted that dams had recently been removed to promote fish migration. She asked whether hydroelectric dams would be a problem for fish. Warren King replied that the bill he knew took fish into account but he did not know about provision for fish in the bill’s current form.

Bill Biederman stated that another reason for H70 would be that financial savings in the permitting process would make small-scale hydroelectric power more financially viable. Warren King noted that half of the cost of small hydroelectric projects can be in permitting.

Elizabeth Walker asked where small hydroelectric projects might happen. Mr. King replied that this is currently unknown but that a Middlebury location could be possible.

Mike Hussey asked for a definition of small versus large hydroelectric projects. It was explained that small is generally defined as less than 5 megawatts. The current bill, however, uses a definition of 1 megawatt or less—this would eliminate the Middlebury Falls as a site.

Charles Billings called the question and Win Colwell seconded.

Article 4 was unanimously adopted by voice vote.

Article 5: Will the Town of Ripton advise the President, Congress and Vermont’s state and federal office holders that Ripton and its citizens strongly support the men and women serving in all branches of the United States Armed Forces in Iraq and believe that the best way to support them is to bring each and every one of them home now and take good care of them when they get home?

Barry King moved the question, and was seconded by Bryan Alexander.

Dick Collitt asked how the article had been warned. Bill Ford said that it had been put in by petition. Ellie Holsman then rose to say she was responsible for originating the petition and spoke in favor of the article.

Tim Hanson called the question, seconded by Paul Bortz.

Article 5 was adopted by voice vote, with a few “nay” votes.

Article 6: Any other business proper to come before this meeting.

Nola Kevra read a poem and asked townspeople to support the community garden at the Ripton School. She announced the season's first meeting on March 14th at 7:00 pm.

A representative of ACT, Addison Central Teens, requested support. She noted that there were many local services for the elderly but few for teenagers who need to be provided with safe after-school activities. She said the teenagers would be more comfortable with one person with whom they could "bond" rather than many volunteers, and that they were therefore asking for funding of a teen coordinator.

Sally Buteau expressed concern with the recent National Forest Service's Natural Turnpike Project and inquired as to its status. Nola Kevra said she has been to many meetings and feels the Forest Service has decided how to proceed although they claim otherwise. She urged townspeople to telephone, write or e-mail their concerns to the Forest Service. Sally Buteau said she did not know where townspeople stood in supporting or opposing the proposed activities. Warren King said that the Forest Service had just sent out a "scoping letter" and people should respond to this letter by March 26th if they desire input. Mr. King noted that there have been varying and conflicting responses from townspeople. The scoping letter may be obtained from Warren King, the Town Clerk, or via e-mail from the Forest Service. Sally Buteau urged people to walk the proposed snowmobile trail, to which she is strongly opposed. She noted that skiers and snowmobilers would be sharing the trail, and also opposed proposed tree-cutting.

Win Colwell spoke in support of H225, a bill promoting local sustainable energy sources. He noted that people could sign a petition he would put in the Community House on voting day.

Barry King noted the information on household energy audits which had been provided as a handout at the Meeting. She said that if enough people were interested in participating, a reduced rate might be obtained. She said that such audits were not inexpensive but that saving energy will lead to reduced costs over time.

Barry King also said she was looking for Ripton's horse owners, as the Otter Creek Natural Resources Conservation District is interested in offering a natural resources workshop for horse owners.

Bonnie DeGray announced that she is running for the Selectboard, commenting that the democratic process would be served thereby.

Warren King moved that the Meeting be adjourned, and was seconded by Richard Ruane.

The Meeting adjourned at 8:45 p.m.

Joyce Dicianna announced that the Meeting would be reconvened on Tuesday, March 6, 2007, at the Community House to vote by Australian ballot on election of Town officers and approval of certain allocations from the General Fund.