

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL SCHOOL MEETING

MARCH 1, 2010

The legal voters of the Town of Ripton met at the Community House in Ripton on Monday, March 1, 2010, at 7:30 p.m. to act upon Articles 1-4 of the 2010 School Warning. Approximately 80 people attended.

Moderator Joyce Dicianna called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m. After welcoming all, reviewing procedures and reading an invocation, the Moderator gave the floor to Representative Willem Jewett.

Representative Jewett stated he was here for questions, and proceeded with a broad sketch of goings on in Montpelier. He described more and bigger issues than he had ever seen, including the budget, Vermont Yankee, school finance and governance, courts, transportation, and insurance. The legislature will act, but it is tough work. In the last couple of years \$450 million was squeezed out of the budget, with an additional \$150 million to be eliminated this year. There is less talk of protecting the neediest, because we know we're not, and a sense that people want a balanced budget. Rep. Jewett wanted to hear from voters to learn different opinions and ideas, and gave an example of budget-cutting: eliminating transportation of dialysis patients. Good news is in transportation – especially here in Ripton with paving scheduled for Route 125 and the northernmost bridge on the Goshen Road to be replaced.

Edmund Sullivan asked about the budget process. Are there untouchable items or sacred cows? In this new era what insights can you give us? Rep. Jewett responded that for eight years they balanced the budget. The problem isn't overspending. Revenues tanked, though seem to be stabilized. As for sacred cows, he didn't know of any - if transportation for dialysis is cut, seems not. Jerome Shedd asked for a reason not to look at the revenue side, such as raising tax rates. Rep. Jewett responded not seeing support for tax increases. Mr. Shedd said he is willing to pay. Michael Connors asked if we can go after multinational companies that don't pay livable wages or contribute revenue to Vermont. Rep. Jewett described a Blue Ribbon Commission looking at the existing tax base and where/how to revise the tax code.

Nola Kevra heard talk about consolidating schools, about numbers not kids, and asked if we should be concerned about our school being closed. Rep. Jewett does not expect a school consolidation mandate.

Robert Wagner shared information from a study by UVM's Gund Institute for Ecological Economics which was presented to the House Ways and Means Committee. The study reports that 1.2 billion a year in revenue is taken tax-free from Vermont by companies such as Nestle and Perrier. Mr. Wagner continued that Vermont should not be a banana republic for resource extraction, the sacred cow is corporate America, and asked why the study was ignored. Rep. Jewett, not a member of the Ways and Means Committee, was not familiar with the study.

Bonnie DeGray asked about the Current Use program, and a moratorium on enrollment. Rep. Jewett gave an overview of the program, describing its intent to keep taxes reasonable for those who use land for forestry and farming. Last year a goal of reducing the cost of the program by 1.6 million was set. Over the summer several groups reached consensus on a proposal for reform and cost saving. The House approved parts of that proposal, and a one-year moratorium on new enrollments. The bill moved to the Senate where it will likely be figured out by a conference committee.

Moderator Joyce Dicianna, read the School Warning at 7:50 p.m.

ARTICLE 1: To see if the voters of the Town School District will approve the sum of **\$763,567** to defray current expenses of the Town School District for the ensuing school year and to pay outstanding orders and obligations.

Article 1 was moved by Barbara King and seconded by Lauren Cox. Discussion of Article 1 followed.

School Board Chair, Carol Ford, thanked the thirty-plus people who attended the January Budget Hearing. She reflected that the Board sometimes works in a vacuum but people came, the Board listened and changed the budget accordingly. There are no new initiatives in the budget, and one paraprofessional is eliminated. That decision was hard because everyone contributes to the School, and it means that in the last five years the number of paraprofessionals decreased from 5.8 to 2.8 positions.

Charles Billings acknowledged the hard work done by the School Board to keep budget numbers down, but feared that a drop in student numbers and state aid will increase taxes, such as with last year's 9-10% increase. Mr. Billings analysis of our real estate taxes over the last fifteen years shows taxes double every 9-10 years. He cautioned that this is not sustainable; eventually people are unable to pay. Ms. Ford sympathized but stated that the thing the School Board can do is set the School budget. The tax rate depends on many variables, as shown on page 62 of the Town Report. Mr. Billings recognized the limits of the Board's control over the tax rate, but stated that at a town level we need to do something so as not to see doubling every ten years. Mr. Jewett referred to p. 62 to show that the Board did its work and that this year the common level of appraisal (cla) did not change much, so is not driving the tax rate. Mr. Billings asked if the General Fund is included, are we level from last year? Discussion continued about the respective Boards who prepare budgets independent of one another. Mr. Jewett noted that this is the first year that the homestead tax rate increased, and that what happens in Montpelier, and with the tax rate, happens after this meeting.

Carol Ford provided answers to questions asked at the Budget Hearing about student to teacher ratios and per pupil cost comparisons. Based on data from two years ago, the School's student to teacher ratio was 9.8 students per 1 teacher. District-wide 8.9 students:1 teacher was the lowest ratio, 11.3:1 the highest. In the seven elementary schools of the ACSU District, only one has a higher per pupil cost than Ripton this year; next year four will be higher. Susan Hanson asked the range of per pupil cost. In ACSU \$14,306 is the high, \$12,399 the low, and Ripton is \$14,186.

Mr. Jewett remarked that the budget is just a one-year plan, and that the Board is talking about long-range planning. The twenty-year construction bond is paid, and the Board wants to be sure we are still teaching our children in the next twenty years. Those who attended the budget hearing were thanked, and asked to continue to participate. A sign-up sheet was passed among the Meeting.

The Moderator called the question. Article 1 passed by unanimous voice vote.

ARTICLE 2: To see if the voters of the Town School District will authorize the Board of Directors to place **\$15,000** from the FY 08 Unreserved Fund Balance (of \$31,740) into the Capital Improvement Reserve Fund.

Article 2 was moved by Barbara King and seconded by Edmund Sullivan.

Of the \$31,740 unreserved fund balance, \$16,740 is used to reduce taxes, and \$15,000 proposed for addition to this fund. Mr. Billings asked about anticipated capital improvements during the next 3-5 years,

and the total fund balance. Ms. Ford thought the 20-year-old roof is likely the next big capital expense, and referred voters to the \$50,093 fund balance on page 70.

The Moderator called the question. Article 2 was adopted by unanimous voice vote.

ARTICLE 3: To see if the voters of the Town School District will authorize the Board of Directors to use **\$940** from the Security Light project balance (total of \$940) for the playing field fencing barrier project.

Article 3 was moved by Barbara King and seconded by Edmund Sullivan.

Michael Hussey reminded voters of last year's discussion about the playing fields and the problem of damage by joy-riders. Security cameras, as approved last year, are part of a monitoring solution, but a proposed light on the flagpole proved too expensive. After evaluating options for preventing damage, the Board proposes a split-rail fence, with a materials cost of \$990, which volunteers can install. Installation by a contractor is estimated at \$3,500. Mr. Hussey expects the fence to take care of 90% of the problem, and noted that the fields will be ready for play by fall and a plan exists for parking during the Ridge Run. Nola Kevra's question about growing beans the fence was answered with an enthusiastic yes.

The Moderator called the question. Article 3 was adopted by unanimous voice vote.

ARTICLE 4: To transact any other business proper to come before said meeting.

Ms. Ford thanked the assembly for its wonderful support of the School. Bonnie DeGray thanked the School Board for listening to the Town and being responsive.

Moderator Joyce Dicianna announced that the Meeting would reconvene Tuesday, March 2, 2010, in the Ripton Town Office to vote by Australian Ballot on Articles 5 through 7 of the 2010 School District Warning.

Joyce Dicianna, Moderator

Sally Hoyler, Town Clerk

Ripton School Directors

Carol Ford, Chair

Michael Hussey

Willem Jewett

Amy McGlashan

Connie Trudeau