

## MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL SCHOOL MEETING

MARCH 3, 2008

**The legal voters of the Town of Ripton met at the Community House in Ripton on Monday, March 3, at 7:30 p.m. to act upon articles one through three of the 2008 School Warning. There were about 103 people in attendance.**

Moderator Joyce Dicianna called the meeting to order at 7:35 p.m. She thanked those who had contributed to the pre-meeting social, welcomed newcomers, and gave a brief review of Robert's Rules of Order. Ms. Dicianna urged any hesitant voters to feel free to ask questions.

Willem Jewett, who serves both as State Representative and as a Ripton School Board Member, was obligated to attend other meetings as well as Ripton's. He therefore spoke before Article 1 was moved, and addressed two topics: 1) Article 2 of the School Warning; and 2) legislative activities at the State level.

### Article 2 Background Information

Article 2 requests voter approval of an expenditure of \$2,700 from the Capital Projects Fund to pay for upgrades to the School playing field. Mr. Jewett reported that the playing field gets heavy use as a soccer field by both the School and the community—a good thing. Its quality has deteriorated to the point where the surface is gravel over some sparse grass. This surface causes problems when playing soccer, and has resulted in some injuries. The field needs grading, topsoil and seeding. Several bids were requested for this work, with the lowest of about \$11,000 submitted by Maiden Lane Contractors. Various funding sources have been lined up:

- \$ 1,300 State grant (obtained by Allison Biederman)
- \$ 3,000 community donations
- \$ 2,000 Friends of Ripton School (FORS)
- \$ 2,000 Cerf Foundation grant (applied for by Jane Phinney; not finalized)

The above totals \$8,300, leaving \$2,700 needed to make up the total of \$11,000. If the Cerf Foundation does not provide funding, more community donations will be solicited.

Bill Ford inquired how long people would have to stay off the field after seeding. Mr. Jewett responded that if the work was done in the spring perhaps play could resume in the fall. Mr. Ford thought that it would be necessary to stay off the field for a full year. Mr. Jewett noted that one problem has been joyriding on the field by illegal vehicles. He agreed it would be necessary to leave the field untrodden for as long as possible to establish the surface grass. Charles Billings asked whether the field would be fenced. Mr. Jewett replied that there would be a berm, and whatever measures necessary to keep joyriders off the field.

Bonnie DeGray asked how much money was in the Capital Projects Fund. Carol Ford directed her attention to page 62 of the Town Report, which gives a balance of \$70,222.57.

Andrea Chesman asked if FORS could pay more toward the field's improvement, and Mr. Jewett responded that more money will not be needed if the Cerf Foundation contributes \$2,000.

Joreen Doria inquired how much of the School's play area was taken up by the field in question. Mr. Jewett replied that the area was 245 by 300 feet, considerably bigger than a regulation soccer field.

Barry King asked when the work would be done. Mr. Jewett replied it would be done this summer. Ms. King pointed out that the area had been important for use as parking for the Ripton Ridge Run, and Mr. Jewett said we would need to find a different place for the parking.

James Daignault asked if it were possible to get volunteer help and machinery to perform the work. Mr. Jewett said he hoped people would volunteer, that it would be helpful to have assistance with raking and the like. He noted that Mike Hussey had agreed to serve as “Clerk of Works” for the project.

Shari Brown inquired about impact on the School’s sports programs in the fall. Mr. Jewett responded that it might be difficult to use the field, and that another section could be temporarily used. He said this issue needs to be explored.

There being no other discussion, Mr. Jewett moved on to his:

### **Legislative Report**

A handout summarizing legislative activity was distributed. Mr. Jewett said that there are real financial problems this year, with flat revenue projected for 2009. The financial pinch is reflected in the budget and in legislative proposals. He believes the legislature is doing some good work to reduce expenditures, citing a recent House bill saving money in corrections (on which the State now spends more money than higher education). He also cited S. 209, the Energy Efficiency and Affordability Act, which targets savings through improved efficiency and promotion of renewable energy use. He noted that Vermonters are spending over \$800 million more on fossil fuels today than they were four years ago, highlighting the need for this legislation. The bill would also expand energy efficiency to include thermal fuels.

Mr. Jewett stated a commitment to restoring some cuts made to local road funding. He said it had been easier to cut funding to local roads from the transportation budget, because no Federal funds were involved at the local level.

In summary, legislation is really impacted by financial issues now—Mr. Jewett said that Vermont is in a financial crisis, the extent of which we will not know until it is over.

James Daignault commented on out-of-control fuel costs and record profits by oil and gas companies—he asked why we could not do something about this. Mr. Jewett responded that he was asked in Salisbury about the “Enron loophole” which adds \$1 to each gallon of fuel in the Federal tax code. He said he doesn’t really understand the issue, but that the legislature is “out to do something to change that.”

Tim Hanson asked how the Catamount Health Insurance program is working out. Sally Hoyler displayed a board with information on the program, which would also be available for perusal at the next day’s voting in the Community House. Mr. Hanson asked if there had been a move to eliminate the one-year waiting period for the uninsured. Mr. Jewett said action on the waiting period was delayed until after Town Meeting Day. He said that going to a zero waiting period could stress insurance companies and cause an unmanageable flood of enrollees. Charles Billings asked if projected numbers of people had signed up for the Catamount Health Plan; Mr. Jewett did not know.

Nola Kevra spoke about “Health Care for the Planet.”

James Daignault asked if there were incentives to use alternative energy resources. Mr. Jewett directed him to S. 209, which considers all fuels. He said the real push is to insulate houses, “buttoning them up” and encouraging use of more efficient boilers.

Richard Kimler asked Mr. Jewett for his personal view of where revenues could be found to fund the budget. Mr. Jewett responded that one possibility is the capital gains loophole which the Governor has proposed closing. Argument now is over how to use the resulting \$21 million, with debate ongoing.

James Daignault commented that our roads are bad and getting worse, that there is a real need for road maintenance and repair. Mr. Jewett pointed to flat revenue combined with a 20% yearly increase in maintenance costs. The result is less repair and maintenance. He also felt there was not enough competition in this area, that not enough bids are received.

The School Board Meeting recommenced at 8:00 p.m.

**ARTICLE 1: To see if the voters of the Town School District will approve the sum of \$812,701 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 Richard Kimler and seconded by Laurie Cox.

Carol Ford, School Board Chair, discussed changes in the School budget. She referred to page 53 of the Town Report, “Ripton School District 2008-09 Estimated Finance.” Commenting that the formula gets lengthier and more complicated each year, she noted that reporting changes made a comparison of 2007-08 figures with 2008-09 figures somewhat like comparing apples to oranges. Under Act 130, elementary education expenses are separated from high school expenses, whereas previously they were not.

She noted that the \$812,701 budget represents an increase of 2.56%, but that there is also a deficit of \$10,793 from last year to make up. The deficit resulted from the State providing \$25,000 less in revenue than anticipated (largely due to overpayments in past years) rather than from the School’s overspending (she pointed out that the 2006-07 budget was in fact underspent by about \$12,000).

Ms. Ford noted that private pre-schools had lobbied successfully to receive State aid, and that this is reflected in \$1,129 going to private providers (p. 56 of Town Report). She said, however, that because the student in question is counted as a Ripton student, State aid increases to the point where we come out even or ahead in funds.

She noted that on page 57 there is a difference in the method of reporting Support Services, now broken down into “Regular” and “Special.” This represents a difference in accounting practice, not in spending.

In the area of personnel, Ms. Ford noted that health insurance costs had risen by about 5%. Ripton is in the second year of a three-year contract, and salaries are dictated by this contract. There is an increase in salaries of about 4.5%.

Dick Collitt asked how our estimated per pupil spending compares with State averages. Ms. Ford replied that she did not have State figures, but gave a comparison with other towns in the Supervisory District—we are neither the lowest nor the highest. Mr. Collitt asked what the per pupil spending maximum could be if we are to stay under the limit where we would be penalized. Ms. Ford wasn’t sure of the exact figure, but said if we were to spend \$41,000 more, we would reach the threshold and exceed the limit.

Charles Billings asked if he was correct in thinking our School spending would increase by 2.56% but our property taxes by nearly 10%. Carol Ford replied that this was so, citing that education costs include high school costs as well as Ripton School costs, and that Ripton’s common level of appraisal also contributes to the high property tax increase. In order to have a state-wide property tax, the State looks at property sales over a 3-year period and “equalizes” a town’s grand list to 100% of fair market value. This is done so that towns across the state are compared equally. As the level of appraisal drops, the amount of state aid also drops. Mr. Billings asked if this was something we have no control over, and Ms. Ford replied that what we have control over is the amount we put in our budget.

Mr. Daignault expressed his feeling that Vermonters are heavily taxed.

Bonnie DeGray asked for and received clarification of some financial figures given in Willem Jewett’s newsletter.

Richard Kimler called the question and Steve Zwicky seconded.

Article 1 was adopted by a unanimous voice vote.

**ARTICLE 2: To see if the voters of the Town School District will authorize the Board of Directors to use \$2,700 from the Capital Projects Fund to pay for upgrades to the playing field.**

Article 2 was moved by Laurie Cox and seconded by Erik Eriksen.

This is the article that was discussed in depth at the beginning of the Meeting.

James Daignault suggested looking for other avenues to decrease costs—perhaps a reliance on volunteers. He was in favor of an improved playing field but felt costs should be for materials, not labor.

Hilda Billings stated that she felt we should pay Nola Kevra something for her work on the community garden. She thanked everyone for assisting her when out walking, in providing transportation, and in snow plowing. She mentioned her deep roots in Ripton, and the “3B’s” of Beans, Barnards and Billings. Mrs. Billings was applauded by the Meeting.

Burke Doria asked if it would be better to fix the playing field in a few years. Mike Hussey responded that costs would only be going up, and that nothing had been done to improve or maintain the field since it was built. Carrie Wulfman said it was important to fix the field if there had been injuries.

Mike Seligman asked how the FORS contribution had been determined. Connie Trudeau said that Principal Jane Phinney felt it to be an appropriate amount, and that FORS had recently paid for the summer program.

Sue Collitt commented that this work was just the sort of thing for which the Capital Projects Fund was intended.

Richard Kimler called the question and Erik Eriksen seconded.

Article 2 was adopted by unanimous voice vote.

**ARTICLE 3: To transact any other business proper to come before said meeting.**

Carol Ford thanked our two School Directors who retired this year—between them, Nancy Breiden and David Disque had thirty years of school board experience. They received applause from the Meeting.

Richard Kimler expressed his dissatisfaction with the large pay and benefit discrepancy between elementary and high school teachers in the District. He noted that this did not affect him directly, as he was retiring this year, but felt strongly that elementary teachers are undervalued and should receive increased remuneration.

Nola Kevra spoke of her “health plan” at the School whereby she has provided a juice machine. She would welcome donations of fruits and vegetables for juicing. She also asked for support for the community garden.

Jim Daignault asked whether salaries for school personnel were listed. Carol Ford responded that salaries are a matter of public record, and are available for viewing at the Supervisory Union’s Central Office. Mr. Daignault asked if extra-curricular activities are funded, and Ms. Ford replied that many are available at no cost (skating, cross-country skiing, knitting).

Win Colwell inquired about the impact of last year’s energy-saving expenditures of \$20,000. Mike Hussey listed the proposed areas of energy saving: 1) replacement of electric bulbs and ballast, 2) motion detector installation, and 3) hot water heater upgrades. Of the \$20,000, \$12,643 has been spent. Of this, \$12,331 was spent to replace electric bulbs and ballast (and to dispose of the old fixtures). Efficiency Vermont has donated \$3,500 toward energy-efficiency activity. Approximately \$10,800 remains in the budget to fund increased energy savings. Very preliminary estimates indicate savings of approximately \$3,000 per year.

No action has been taken on hot water heater upgrades as yet. There are other possible areas of energy saving which are being considered, such as air handlers. Mr. Hussey mentioned that Sharon Stearns, Business Manager at the Supervisory Union, had been very helpful in managing monies—she informed the Board of eligibility for State funds reimbursing us for 30% of project costs (but only after project completion).

Warren King asked if there had been a subsidy from Efficiency Vermont, and it was explained that this is the \$3,500 referred to above.

Win Colwell noted that the School is in a perfect location for solar power, and suggested looking at solar energy for water heating. In such a conspicuous location, evidence of solar power might inspire some other people to investigate using this technology.

Ed Sullivan moved adjournment, and Erik Eriksen seconded.

After a unanimous voice vote, the School Meeting adjourned at 8:40 p.m.

Joyce Dicianna announced that the Meeting would be reconvened on Tuesday, March 4, 2008, at the Community House to vote by Australian ballot on Articles 4 through 8 of the 2008 School District Warning.

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Ripton School Director Chair

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